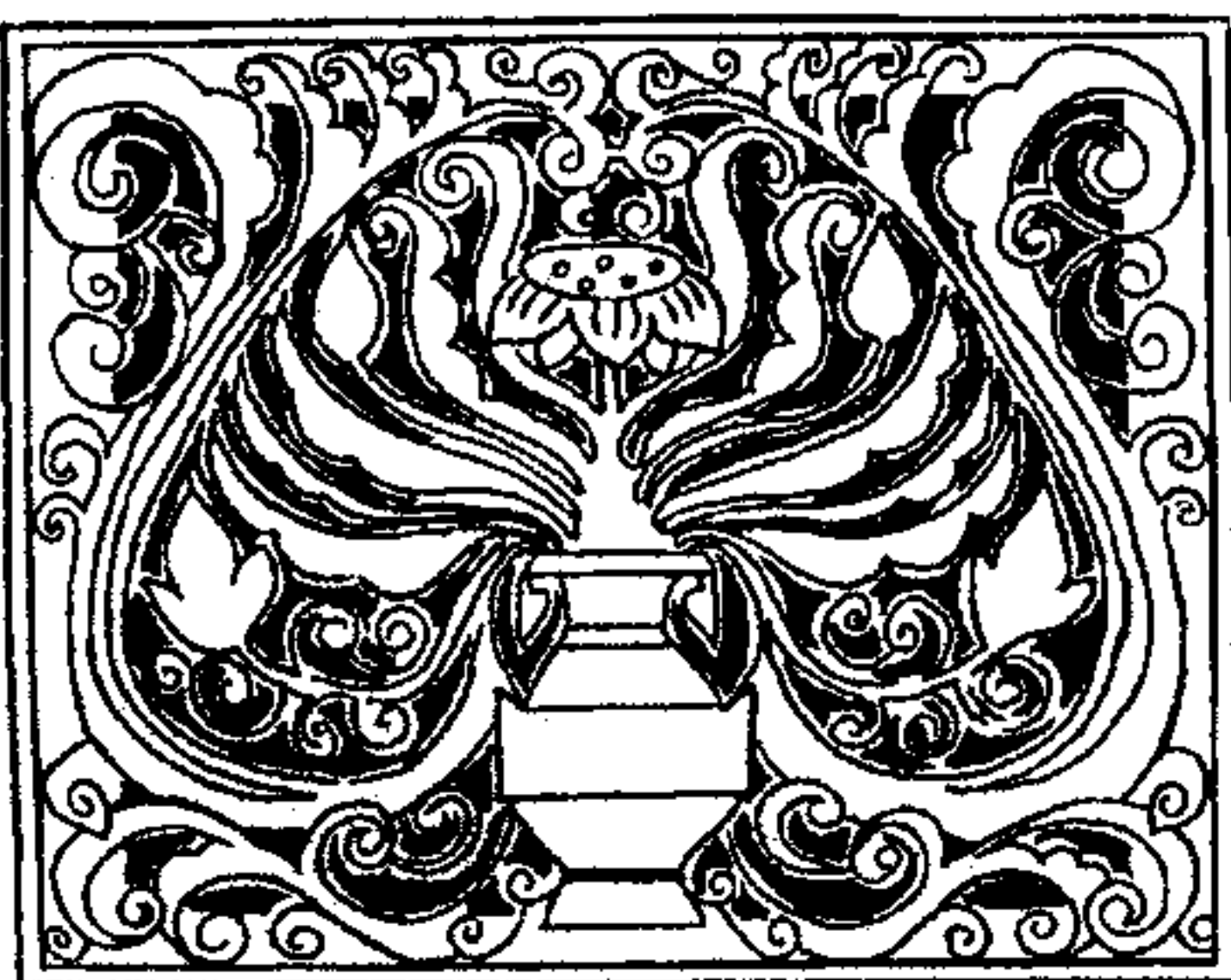




PRABUDDHA BHARATA

*A Monthly Journal of Ramakrishna Order
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896*



DECEMBER 2000

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Rates of Subscription

	Annual	3 Years	20 Years	Patron (25 Yrs)
India & Nepal	Rs. 60	Rs. 170	Rs 600	Rs. 1500
Sri Lanka & Bangladesh	Rs.180	Rs. 500	Rs. 2500	Rs. 5000
U.S.A. & Canada	US \$ 20	\$ 60	\$ 300	\$ 600
Other Countries	U.K.£ 15	£ 45	£ 225	£ 500

Names of patron subscribers will be published in Prabuddha Bharata

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प्राप्य
वरान्निबोधत



PRABUDDHA BHARATA

ARISE! AWAKE! AND STOP NOT TILL THE GOAL IS REACHED

Vol. 105

DECEMBER 2000

No. 12

VEDIC PRAYERS

मो षु वो अस्मदभि तानि पौंस्या सना
भूवन्द्युम्नानि मोत जारिषुरस्मत्पुरोत जारिषुः ।
यद्वश्चित्रं युगेयुगे नव्यं घोषादमर्त्यं
अस्मासु तन्मरुतो यच्च दुष्टरं दिधृता यच्च दुष्टरं ॥
—Rg Veda, 1.139.8

दध्यङ् ह मे जनुषं पूर्वो अंगिराः
प्रियमेधः कण्वो अत्रिर्मनुर्विदुस्ते मे पुर्वे मनुर्विदुः ।
तेषां देवेष्वायतिरस्माकं तेषु नाभयः
तेषां पदेन मह्या नमे गिरेन्द्राग्रि आ नमे गिरा ॥
—Rg Veda, 1.139.9

O Maruts! May you never become displeased with us. May the glorious wealth and fame bestowed on us by you never become less. May the cattle-wealth in front of us (ie, our cattle) never diminish. May our villages and cities belong to us alone for ages to come. May whatever covetable and new useful thing you get come down to us. Please bestow on us all such wealth as the enemies cannot destroy.

The venerable sage Angirā is very ancient and brilliant. The admirer par excellence of the enlightened intellect (*priyamedhah*) is Kanva, and the one 'beyond three types of sorrow' is Atri. And the extremely intelligent is Manu. All these holy sages know about our birth. Since these great ones are ancient, they know about our forefathers also. The relationship between the gods and these sages is an old one. So they know everything. They are intimately connected with our lives. We reverently bow before these illumined sages and praise them with hymns.

Holy Mother: A Confluence of Many Ideals

EDITORIAL

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi knew that the world consists of people with varying religious inclinations. So like a mother who cooks different dishes to suit the different tastes of her children, she lived many ideals. We shall try to study only a few of them here.

The Buddhist Ideal

The Buddha's four fundamental principles are that (a) the world is suffering (*duḥkha*), (b) suffering is due to desires (*tanhā* or *trṣṇā*), (c) desires are due to ignorance (*avijjā* or *avidyā*), and (d) ignorance can be overcome by attaining the enlightened intellect (*sambodhi*).

Holy Mother's all-suffering life is meant to prove how attachment leads to bondage and suffering. Sri Sarada Devi's mind would always soar so high that it would hardly come down to the body and the world. So she out of compassion pegged her mind to Radhu. Page after page of Holy Mother's life shows what suffering she underwent on account of her 'attachment'. No doubt she could cut asunder this 'attachment' any moment as she herself demonstrated on so many occasions; but her life had a purpose and so she endured.

Holy Mother's words too echo the Buddhist ideals. About the transitoriness of *samsāra*: 'The world is full of sorrow. Happiness is only an empty word.'¹ 'Creation itself is full of griefs.'² About transmigration: 'As long as a man has desires there is no end to his transmigration. It is the desires alone that make him take one body after another.'³ About an important idea of Buddhism, *karma*: 'Such is life, here today, gone tomorrow! Nothing goes with one, except one's merit and demerit;

good and evil deeds follow one even after death.'⁴ Like the Buddhists, she prescribed meditation as the means to attain liberation from sorrow and suffering. She herself was a great meditator and would insist that monks should become adepts in meditation.

The Christian Ideal

Perhaps Holy Mother was the first person to hail the Ramakrishna incarnation as the Saviour. Much before the new incarnation was publicly hailed as the saviour of humanity, it was Holy Mother who openly and distinctly called upon everyone around to pray to the Incarnation, to love him, and also to love his creation in order to attain salvation. 'He [Sri Ramakrishna] is the Godhead and one's chosen deity; he is all the gods and all their sacred word-symbols; in him one worships all the gods and goddesses.'⁵ Holy Mother's preaching the Incarnation as the saviour wasn't a mere emotional statement: she had the authority of repeated visions and commandments. Identical to Christ's Resurrection, Holy Mother saw a day after Ramakrishna's giving up his body that he suddenly *appeared in his body just as it was before he had the disease* and, taking hold of her hands, said, 'Have I died that you are removing the signs of a married woman from your wrists?'⁶ He appeared before Holy Mother frequently and directed her to spread the gospel, initiate disciples, etc.

Holy Mother maintained that the key to salvation was with the incarnation. She would repeat often that the Ramakrishna incarnation

4. *Message*, p. 28.

5. *Message*, pp. 38-9.

6. Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1969), p. 137; also see p. 141. [Hereafter, Gambhirananda.]

1. *The Message of Holy Mother* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1975), pp. 28. [Hereafter, *Message*.]

2. *Message*, p. 27.

3. *Message*, p. 4-5.

had undergone tremendous suffering and had thereby freed humanity from the clutches of suffering. She would say that it was the Incarnation's grace that would liberate us. She said in the tenor of heralding the day of judgement: 'Why are you afraid, son? ... For the Master [Sri Ramakrishna] has truly promised to me, "At the last moment I shall lead by the hand all those who will come to you." Whatsoever anyone of you may do, and howsoever anyone may behave, the Master will have to come at last to take you.'⁷ Further, there's no difference between the sinner and the saint or the rich and the poor this time. The rich could not enter the kingdom of heaven earlier. But now, 'Why do you worry? The Master incarnated himself this time to save the rich, the poor, the learned, the ignorant, and all.'⁸

Regarding creation, her words fairly echo the *Genesis*:

Listen, when God first created man, He endowed him with the spirit of goodness. As a result, men were born with wisdom and it did not take them long to realise that the world was an ephemeral thing. Immediately they took the name of God and set out to meditate on Him and by His grace were liberated from the bonds of life. God thought this will not do; this is not the way to make them play the game of life. In the end along with the spirit of goodness, He mingled in profuse quantities the spirit of materialism and that of vanity. Then the game of life went on with a swing.⁹

Though the concept of Original Sin is not explicit in her words, she says that it is owing to *māyā* that things appear to be what they are. Someone asked her, 'What are all these? Are these *maya*?' Holy Mother replied, 'What else but *maya*? ... It's only by accepting an illusion that I am so; this is nothing but continuing in the midst of an illusion.'¹⁰ Holy Mother accepted the idea of sin, but there was a difference: she repeatedly assured that no one is

damned; that sins vanish into thin air by practising japa, prayer, service, etc. 'Whoever has called upon the Master once has nothing more to fear.'¹¹ If Ramakrishna is everything, what's she? 'He is here in this body in a subtle form. The Master himself declared, "I shall live within you in a subtle form."¹²

Remember the *St John* story of the adulteress woman? When someone told Holy Mother not to allow a person near her because he was extremely polluted, Holy Mother said, 'If my son wallows in the dust or mud, it is I who have to wipe all the dirt from off his body and take him to my lap.'¹³ Suffering for others was her forte. 'If one initiates somebody, one has to take his sins upon oneself. I feel that since the body must perish one day, let it be for the sake of these people,' she would say.¹⁴ Somewhat similar to Christ's words ('Love your enemies, bless them that curse you....' (*St Matthew*, 6.44), and most importantly, 'Love God with all your being and love your neighbour as you love yourself'), Holy Mother says, 'Learn to make the world your own. Nobody is a stranger, my dear; the world is yours.'¹⁵

So far as sadhana is concerned, Holy Mother's life was one long saga of loving devotion and prayer to Ramakrishna. 'Love of God is the essential thing.'¹⁶ 'Love for God brings in blessedness.'¹⁷ She would repeat the mantra at least 10 million times per sitting! As in Christianity, she didn't pay absolute importance to her numerous mystical experiences. She would say: 'What happens when one finds God? Does one grow a pair of horns?'¹⁸ She stressed most on grace and compassion. The final word is to 'be perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.' Says Holy

11. *Message*, p. 39.

12. Gambhirananda, p. 458.

13. Gambhirananda, p. 368.

14. *Message*, p. 2.

15. Gambhirananda, p. 519.

16. *Message*, p. 20.

17. *Message*, p. 32.

18. *Message*, p. 31.

7. Gambhirananda, p. 399.

8. Gambhirananda, p. 274.

9. *Message*, pp. 6-7.

10. Gambhirananda, pp. 465-6.

Mother: 'To realize God and to be absorbed uninterruptedly in His consciousness is the aim.'¹⁹

The Islamic Ideal

'Islam' means surrender. Holy Mother repeated several times, 'O creatures, surrender yourselves, just surrender yourselves.'²⁰ The pillars of Islam are that: (a) Mohammed is the last prophet; (b) there is but one God; (c) one has to pray daily, give alms (*zakat*), go on pilgrimage, etc. In Holy Mother's words, one should do all these while young: 'Prayer and meditation, or pilgrimage or even earning money [for helping others], all these should be done during the earlier part of one's life. In old age, one's physical and mental strength is weakened.'²¹ Her life is a mirror of all these ideals.

The Jain Ideal

The *tirthankara* is the provider of the boat of dharma that takes the soul over to the other shore of the ocean of *samsāra*. So the *tirthankara* becomes an *arhat*, object of veneration. Holy Mother would repeat often that Sri Ramakrishna has come to take the souls across the ocean of *samsāra*. She tirelessly stressed mental *ahimsā*: ie, the ideal that one shouldn't injure others even in thought too.

The Sufi Ideal

One can see the best example of the Sufi ideal in Holy Mother. It's perhaps long after Rabia that the Sufis could find a greater ideal in Holy Mother, if only they studied her life deeply. Such extraordinary love for the Beloved as she had is unheard-of. We read last month in this journal that the perfect Sufi 'goes in and out amongst people and eats and sleeps with them...takes part in social intercourse and never forgets God for a single instant.' Holy Mother lived amidst mad women and her relatives pestered her always. Her household was always crowded and she had to work overtime. All the same, her mind was ever God-intoxicated.

As a chapter of her *life* is captioned, she lived in 'undying union.' For want of space we desist from going into many other details. But an instance of her love should be mentioned. In Vrindaban she was so consumed with spiritual love that she would wander away all alone in the wilderness, eager for the Beloved. Her biographer says, 'In the body and mind of the Mother also was now to be seen a similiar self-absorption. Forgetful of herself she sometimes walked across the vast sandy shore to the waters of the Yamuna, unknown to anybody and she had to be searched out and persuaded to return. But the lack of an inalienably tangible union with him to whose feet all the strings of her heart were tied, oppressed her mind and aroused in it the endless question, "Where is he?"'²²

The Hindu Ideals

It's impossible for this article to note all that Holy Mother practised and taught of the ideals of *sanātana dharma*. From the highest flights of Advaitic realization to simple village devotion, every ideal was practised to perfection by Holy Mother. We shall divide the Hindu ideals into the usual four classes: jnana, bhakti, raja and karma yogas, and then mention her devotion to village customs.

A. Jnana Yoga: That Holy Mother attained Advaitic realization at a very young age is evident in many incidents. One day she went to Tarakeshwar all alone to pray to the Lord to save her divine husband's body. There she heard a crackling sound much resembling the sound of some earthen jars piled up together being broken with a stick. She felt: 'Who is a husband in this world and whose? Who is related to whom here?'²³ Holy Mother would advise: 'Always discriminate. Whenever the mind goes after anything other than God, consider it as transient....'²⁴ She informed the monks at Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati: 'Sri Ramakrishna was all Advaita and preached Advaita. Why should you not

19. *Message*, p. 23.

20. Gambhirananda, p. 407.

21. *Message*, pp. 16-7.

22. Gambhirananda, p. 141.

23. Gambhirananda, p. 134; also see pp. 111-2.

24. *Message*, pp. 22-3.

also follow Advaita?²⁵ Her words can't be mere words: Holy Mother was a Vedantin of Vedantins.

B. Karma Yoga: It's unlikely to find a better example of karma yogi than Holy Mother. Her utter selflessness, hardworking nature, compassion, patience and endurance are all beyond compare. As she herself remarked, 'What a lot of work I did when I was of your age! And yet, in spite of all that work, I repeated my mantra a hundred thousand times.'²⁶ 'Many are known to do great works under the stress of some strong emotion. But a man's true nature is known from the manner in which he does his insignificant daily task.'²⁷ Holy Mother would instruct thus: 'One should be extremely careful about making His service perfectly flawless.'²⁸

C. Bhakti Yoga: From the highest ideal, *prema bhakti* to the ordinary *sāmānya bhakti*, all the diverse elements of devotion found perfect expression in Holy Mother. In spite of having attained the highest, *mahābhāva*, in the devotional path, she practised simple ritualistic worship daily. Regarding image worship, she would remark: 'People have been worshipping images from time immemorial and attaining liberation; do you want to say, that does not mean anything? Our Master had no such dogmatic views.'²⁹ Holy Mother practised all the *bhāvas* or spiritual attitudes with remarkable ease: like those of the servant attitude or *dāsya* ('I am only His servant'³⁰), the peaceful attitude or *śānta* ('I tell you, my daughter, know this body to be divine. ...none of them will understand me so long as I am here...'³¹), the *madhura* attitude (...she might have then thought of herself as Radha,...and was thus lost in the bliss of union in the

Vrindaban of her heart!³²), the *vātsalya* attitude (approaching the image of the child Krishna she called him, 'Come Gopala, come for food'³³), the *sakhyā* attitude ('He is mother, father, friend, relative, acquaintance, my nearest and dearest, and everything'³⁴). 'Holy Mother and bhakti' is a huge subject.

D. Raja Yoga: Holy Mother was an adept in yoga. But by yoga we don't simply mean preliminaries like *yama*, *niyama*, *āsana*, and so on. The ideal of yoga is the attainment of *samādhi* and Holy Mother had to control herself with intense effort from going into deep *samadhi*. She was such an adept in meditation that hours would pass by without her returning to normal consciousness.

E. Village Customs and Rituals: Holy Mother would repeat often that she came to fulfil and not destroy. So she showed due respect wherever necessary, be it tribal customs or simple village rituals. She worshipped the deities of her village like Jatra Siddhi Raya with great devotion. If some tutelary deity had to be worshipped by offering a few *rasagollas* or *bel* leaves, she would do that with great devotion. Though living constantly in the bliss of the highest Truth, she still considered every minor detail real and necessary.

The Sweet Union

Holy Mother Sarada Devi is thus a composite ideal. The yogi, bhakta, jnani, Christian, Sufi, aborigine—she belongs to everyone. From the saint Saradanandaji to the dacoit Amjad, all can receive equal motherly affection from her. That is her speciality.

Holy Mother's life appears to be a simple, single, long story of spirituality. Her teachings can be culled into a tiny booklet, that's all. And she never expressly practised different religions. But hidden behind her simple life are innumerable moods and attitudes. This is a great subject worthy of attention. It's well known that Holy Mother came for the good of the whole world; but it is better to show how she belongs to everyone. □

25. Gambhirananda, p. 452.

26. Gambhirananda, p. 110.

27. *Message*, p. 9.

28. *Message*, p. 38.

29. *Message*, pp. 5-6.

30. Gambhirananda, p. 434.

31. Gambhirananda, p. 437.

32. Gambhirananda, p. 141.

33. Gambhirananda, p. 456.

34. Gambhirananda, p. 450.

IMAGES OF INDIA'S PAST

Bible Mentions Ancient Indian Overseas Trade

Several European scholars of the 19th century, like Professor V. Ball, Bishop Caldwell, etc, wrote after years of painstaking research that the early maritime commerce of India, mentioned vaguely in the Vedas, and proved by the evidence of Egyptian and Assyrian archaeology, is alluded to in several places in the Bible itself. In the days of Solomon there could be supplied from India alone the ivory, garments, armour, spices, and peacocks, which found customers in ancient Syria. Mention is made in *I Kings*, 9:26-8, *Ezekiel*, 27:24, etc about such trade. Besides, another proof that the Bible really refers to the foreign trade of India may be found in the discoveries of some old Dravidian words in the Hebrew text of the *Kings* and other chronicles of the Old Testament (cf. Radhakumud Mookerji, *Indian Shipping*, pp. 91-3).

Wonders are Countless

Āryabhata was the first person in the world to calculate the accurate value of Π (the mathematical symbol, *pi*, which gives the relation of diameter to circumference in a circle) to be 3.1416. Again, it was this great Indian scientist who for the first time declared that the earth was spherical in shape and rotated on its axis. He was also the first to announce that eclipses were caused by the shadow of earth falling on the moon. He was born in 476 BC—much before the rest of the world was to think of science. Centuries later, the European, Purbach (1423-61) gave the reading of Π which equalled Āryabhata's (cf. Will Durant, *Our Oriental Heritage*, p. 528).

A Comment

The founder of American Neohumanism, Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) said, 'The chief obstacle to a better understanding between East and West in particular is a certain type of occidental who is wont to assume almost unconsciously that the East has everything to learn from the West and little or nothing to give in return' (*On Being Creative and Other Essays*, p. 235).

This is What a Great Scholar Said

'Christianity will not suffer by a sympathetic attitude towards Indian religious convictions. Can the Christian teacher who regards his duty otherwise be said to be fulfilling his Master's mission in the Vineyard where Christ Himself laboured? It is a fatal misconception to consider Aryan India as idolatrous or polytheistic. No religion has been more careful to discriminate between the Symbol and the Reality behind it than that which has been taught by Indo-Aryan teachers; and if its principles have not been fully understood by the masses of the people, can it be said that Christianity has been more successful in this respect in its own special field?' wrote E.B. Havell as early as in 1914 in *A Study of Indo-Aryan Civilisation* (p. xxxiv).

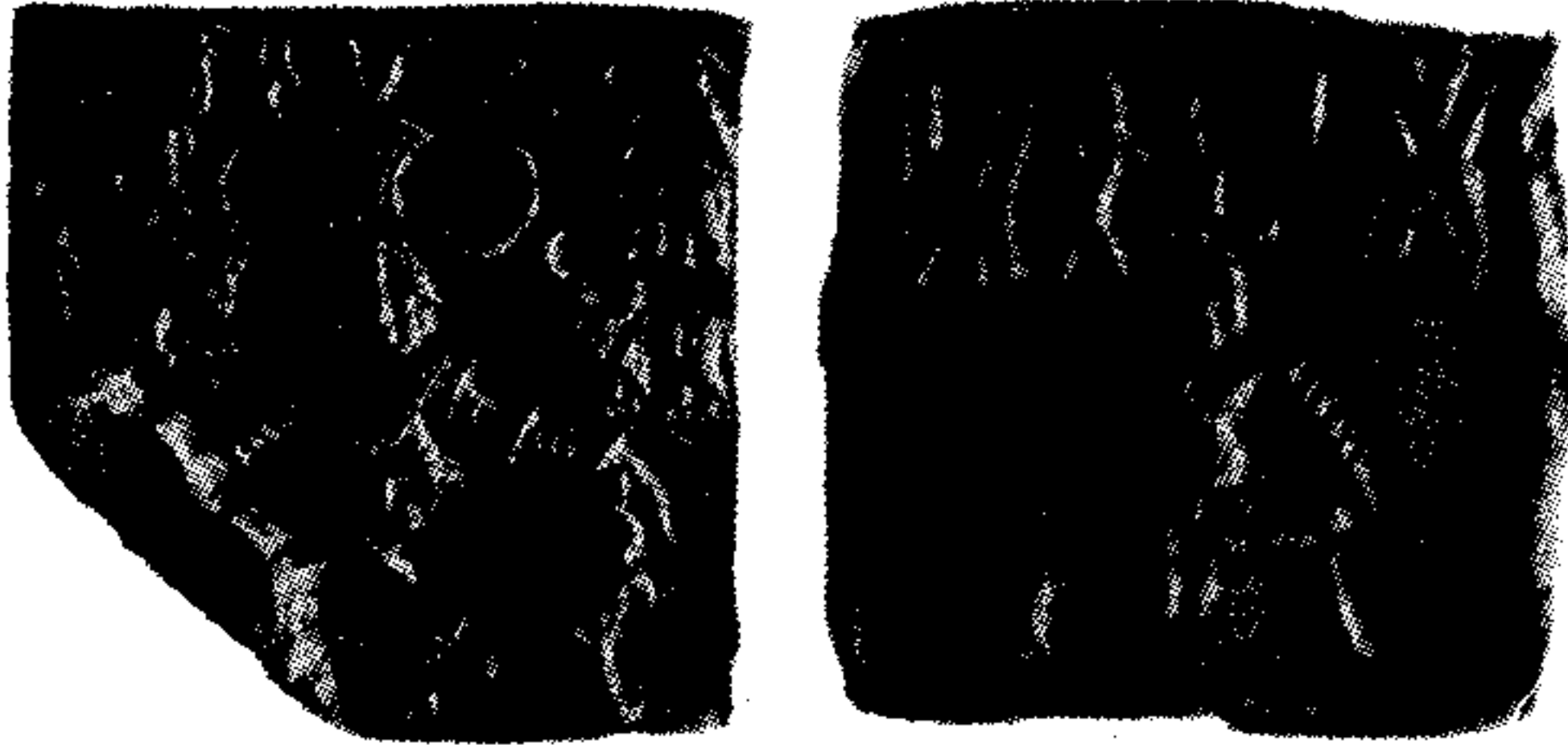
Indian Art

Glimpses of The Last Thousand Years

SANDIP SARKAR

Sri Sandip Sarkar is a well-known figure in the field of art. His works on art have been acclaimed widely. He is presently working for indiansculpture.com, an Internet company catering to the world's love for contemporary Indian sculpture. Sri Sarkar gives us a comprehensive synopsis of Indian art during the past millennium.

Indian art has at least a five-thousand-year-long history: it started with the Indus valley civilization, or Harappan culture as it is presently called. There are examples of cave-



Shiva Pashupati: Harappa

and-rock shelter art which date back roughly to 5500 BC, but these are not perhaps of considerable artistic merit. The art that started with the Harappan culture has, as it were, a continuous history from 3000 BC onwards till the very present. In other words, Indian civilization and art have together spanned a period of five millennia. There have been periods of decline; continuity has been broken intermittently due to adventurers, invaders, or social turmoil of one sort or another. But when things have quietened down, the broken thread has been mended and the work has begun once again. It is a well-known fact today that Indian art has influenced many other civilizations of the world. Sister Nivedita writes that 'far from the Indians having learnt sculpture from the Greeks, they very clearly evolved their own in the northwest colonies of

Bengal, at Bodh Gaya and Banaras. And I am able to *prove prove prove* it up to the hilt.'

The earliest river valley civilizations in West Asia and Egypt, which were perhaps slightly older than the Harappan cluster of cities, rose to great heights and fell gradually, never to rise again. With their fall, their culture and art also lost the power of growth. They finally became part of the glorious heritage of mankind. In the Mesopotamian civilization, begun at Sumer roughly around 4000 BC, to be followed by Babylon, Assyria and Persia, art and culture advanced in all splendour and grandeur. The ancient north African civilization of Egypt, perhaps as old as Sumer, had shown a phenomenal power of advancement for over 3,000 years. It survived for long and then, slowly, declined even as Alexandrian Greece followed by the Roman Empire rose to great heights. Yet, after touching a dizzy peak, all of these civilizations fell. This pattern of rise, decline and fall has been true of Minoan civilization of ancient Crete as well.

It is only in India and China that the respective traditions of art and culture have never succumbed to the ravages of time. In both nations, the rise and fall of cities, empires and dynasties have never upset the continuity and growth of civilization and art. For both civilizations there had been periods of dormancy, and art and culture had languished for some time. After each brief interlude, things picked up again. Under changed circum-



Gaja Lakshmi: Sunga Dynasty Art

stances, new avenues to expression have been explored with great success and adjustments made to suit the times, but not at the cost of disowning the past heritage.

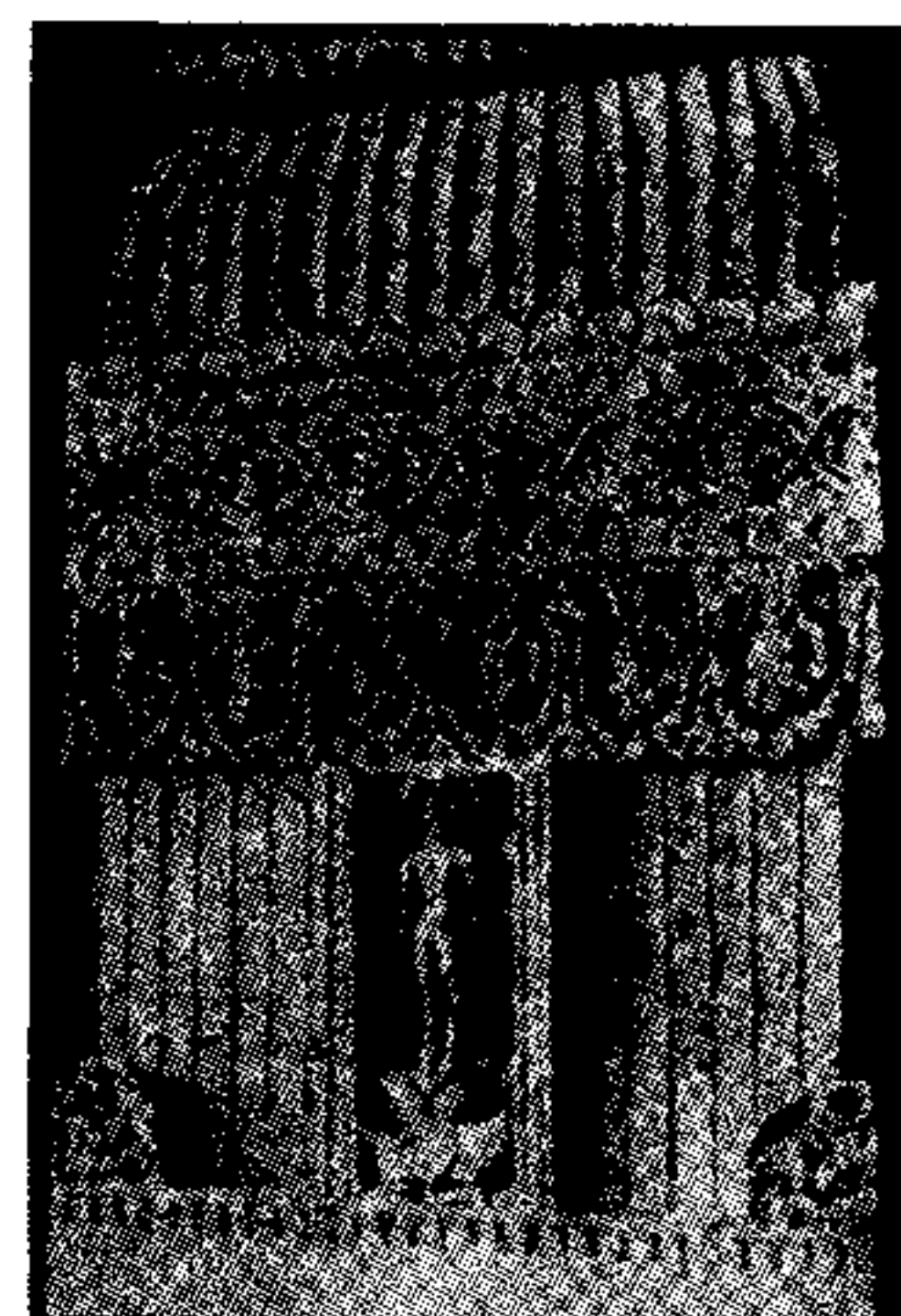
During the last one thousand years Indian art and culture have shown a remarkable power of resilience even under severe stress and strain, when the outward changes have been traumatic. During the last millennium, two of India's great post-Vedic religions, Buddhism and Jainism, lost royal patronage, and consequently, public sympathy. But before that, it was this very royal patronage and popular emotional support that helped in bringing about newer forms of expression as hymns, lyrical poetry and visual arts. The Jaina and Buddhist periods of the previous millennium specially saw a rise in sculpture and paintings, as can be seen from the excavated architectural caves, embellished with sculpture and paintings, which acted as monastic settings for monks living within the fold of religious orders.

There were many branches of Vedic religion: Vaishnava, Shakta, Shaiva, etc. The effulgences of their glory was seen in the popular bhakti movement. In each of these different religious groups the worshipper was a devotee of either Vishnu, Durga, Kali, Chandi, Shiva or some other deity. Each of these devotional religions had elaborate mythology, theology and rituals, and in art, a separate iconography. Each was, if not mutually exclusive, never fully inclusive or tolerant of the others as it was to happen in the later stage of devel-

opment, which led them all unitedly to be called Hinduism as we know them since colonial times. These differences, however, helped art tremendously by way of creation of numerous sculptures and paintings. Superb temples adorned with stunning pieces of architecture and murals were built by these devotional groups, some of which have survived destruction.

With the advent of Muslim invaders during the beginning of the previous millennium, though the ancient glory was lost to a great extent, newer forms of architecture began to evolve. Muslim architecture served both sacred and secular purposes. Palaces, mausoleums, forts, etc were built along with mosques. Due to the abhorrence of graven images in Semitic traditions, this period witnessed a divorce between architecture and sculpture.

The Buddhists in eastern India and the Jains in the western had already made exquisite miniatures to adorn religious manuscripts during the first millennium AD. The skill of the scribes with their intricate calligraphy, and the art of painters with their illuminating gem-like miniatures had reached new heights. By the time of the Mughals paper had arrived in India. The Mughals were the last of the Muslim dynasties to rule India before the British takeover. Under their patronage, illustrated-manuscript art reached new peaks and miniature paintings gained fresh grounds of sensitive expression. From the grand Mughal im-



Buddhist Art: Carved Pillars (Ellora caves)

perial courts, this art reached gubernatorial provincial courts soon.

Sculpture existed only in the South, as myriad examples of medieval temple structures and bronze images prove. The sculpture tradition declined during the period of western dominance and survived among traditional rural and tribal metalcrafts people. The fate of painting was even more pathetic. With the decline of the Mughals, imperial ateliers closed down. During the 18th century, travelling pedlar artists began to arrive in Hindustan in large numbers from Europe. They received East India Company's administrative patronage. As they travelled throughout India they keenly observed the uniqueness of the landscape and the peculiarities in people's lifestyles, manners and customs, etc. They then worked these themes up into numerous pieces of art and published them in the media. During their tours, these artists would seek commissions from Indian princely classes. They would receive portrait commissions from the aristocracy. Their rates were exorbitant but their anatomical naturalism won them admiration from this class.

The lot of the Indian artists was pathetic. Their artistic skills began to be disfavoured and even questioned. The provincial gubernatorial ateliers began to close down following the example of the imperial ones. Among the diaspora of the artists, a few arrived at the British capital, Calcutta. They freelanced souvenir paintings on mica, depicting diversity of the works of the working class. They executed these for the British administrators and tourists to take the pieces of art home. Some of them compromised their style and accommodated anatomical realism within their ways of delineation. This is how the 'Company School' was born and served the British interests, depicting the life of the people and the flora and fauna. They did excellent work for natural history books that the British published.

The impact of the foreign travelling-salesmen artists had shaken the confidence of the Indian artists in their own skills, and had



Disciples adoring the Buddha: Old Ajanta Painting

cast a shadow of doubt about their ability in the minds of patrons. Indian art and artists touched the rock bottom and gradually their tradition and skill were lost. Art survived among the simple folk, in the tribal zones of influence and the bazaars of big cities. One of the finest examples of this kind of painting are the ones done in the Kalighat style. With the advent of cheap prints the bazaar paintings petered out too.

Fortunately the pedlar painters who had begun arriving during the 18th century were sent back packing by the mid-1850s as they were unable to withstand the competition of the newly invented camera. Photography did the documentation works which the pedlar artists executed at a faster rate and more economically. The taste of the aristocracy and the newly emerging merchant class touched a new low under the influence of the bad tastes of the British administrators ruling India.

By the middle of the 19th century the British opened art schools in the port cities of Madras, Bombay, as they were called then, and Calcutta. European teachers taught academic neo-classical anatomical and naturalistic art of the British variety. The training at these institutions began churning out draughtsmen, cartographers, illustrators and commercial artists—all suited to the imperial purposes. However, excellent artists began to appear through these outlets also.

These institution-trained artists had only western role models. They began to depict the Indian scene in water colours, pastel, ink and oils, and made portrait statues in stone. With all this, somewhere there was a slight discordant note. It was then that the evaluation of Indian art began during the early years of the last century. The national movement forced Indian artists to search for their roots.

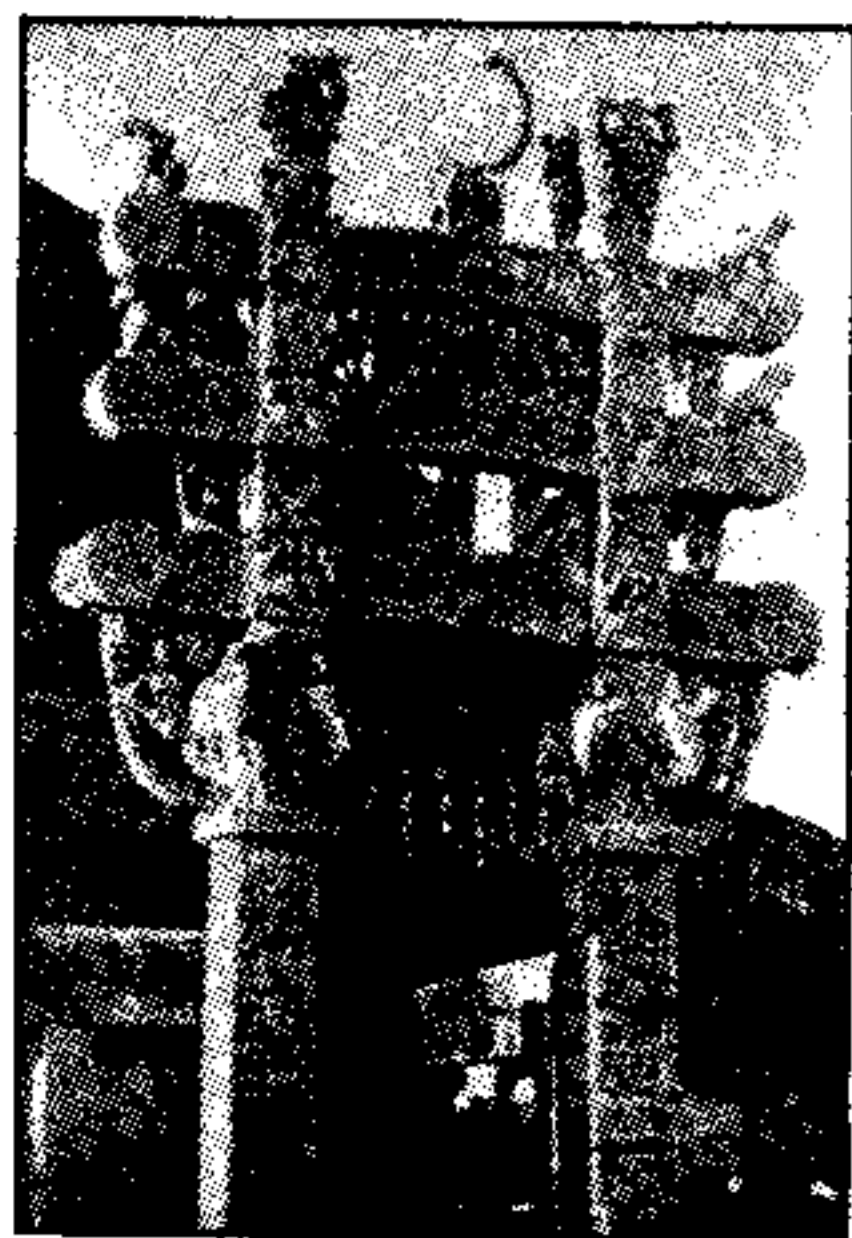
Under colonial rule during the 19th and 20th centuries, artists divided themselves into two opposing groups. Under the leadership of Abanindranath Tagore, the first group was nationalistic in attitude. This group, guided by the western orientalist, visiting Japanese artists (serving the interests of their imperial sovereign with the propaganda of Pan-Asianism), and recent converts to the folds of Hinduism, earnestly searched for an exclusive Indian identity in the realm of classical and medieval heritage. The works of Raja Ravi Verma, Hemmen Mazumdar, Atul Bose and Pestomjee Bomenjee show their innovative skills. The other group was the western-trained one, which had become westernized in its outlook and gave itself fully to rendering anatomical neo-classical style of art.

From the middle of the 1920s there emerged a third group of powerful artists. They did not care for or share the ideas of the other two groups. Gaganendranath Tagore, Jamini Roy and Rabindranath Tagore refused to participate in the trends of their times. They were internationalist in their approach and rendering. Soon, Ramkinker, Benode Behari

Mukherjee and Amrita Sher-Gill joined the movement. In 1943 a 'Calcutta Group' was formed with Nirode Mazumdar, Rathin Moitra, Shubho Tagore, Paritosh Sen, etc, and two sculptors—Prodosh and his wife Kamala Dasgupta. In 1947, the 'Progressive Artists Group' was formed in Bombay of those days by M.F. Hussain, Ara, Gege, Raza and Souza among others. The climate of the art world got transformed because of the experimental work of both groups.

Since independence, the art world has changed for good. The new generation of artists who have emerged after several years of independence are constantly changing their outlook. Gone is the trauma of western dominance. The inferiority complex that artists suffered from during that dominance has also healed. Painters like Gaitonde, Akbar Padamsee, Ramkumar, Bijon Chaudhary, Nikhil Biswas, Sunil Das, Ganesh Pyne, Bikash Bhattacharya, and sculptors like Chintamani Kar, Dhanraj Bhagat, Shakho Chaudhury, etc to mention only a few, prove the richness and depth of the present-day artistic endeavour.

To sum up, during the last millennium excavated rock structured architecture was finally given up to make way for free standing massive buildings—temples with relief and architectonic sculptures as well as sculpture all round. Successive generations of kings throughout India paid for the erection of temples encrusted with sculptures. The profundity of artistic vision and skill of execution of those times fill both experts and lay persons with awe. These medieval temples are all built in stone, the terracotta temples of Bengal being an exception. With the Muslim advent, architecture shed its sculptural adornment and concentrated on the frozen music of abstract geometry. The Mughals supported miniature painters and by their examples inspired provincial governors and princely courts to patronize miniature art. Indian artistic tradition nosedived during the period of western dominance. It is rising like a phoenix from the ashes just now. □



Sanchi Art: North Gateway

The Great Kumbha Melā

Kumbha Melā of great antiquity will be held at Prayag (Allahabad) next month. Here is a bird's-eye view of the significance of the event in question-and-answer form.

What is Kumbha Melā? 'Melā' in Sanskrit means a congregation or gathering: people from different places assemble at a certain place on some special occasion for some special purpose, and such an assembly is a Melā. *Melāḥ* means an astrological congregation or confluence of planets. *Kumbha* generally means a sacred vessel or pot—in this case one containing nectar. So 'Kumbha Melā' very broadly means a religious gathering at a holy place, connected with the nectarine pot bestowing immortality, at a special time.

What is the legend behind Kumbha Melā? What exactly is the meaning of Kumbha Melā? We all know about the famous Purāṇic story of the 'churning of the ocean.' *Bhāgavata* (8.5-11) describes this elaborately. According to it, in the Raivata Manvantara, when the gods (Devas) incurred a curse from sage Dūrvāsa and became extremely weak, they

suffered terribly at the hands of the villainous demons (Asuras). So the Lord incarnated on the earth as Ajita and decided to make the gods immortal. To make the gods immortal, however, the celestial nectar of immortality (*amṛta*) had to be churned out of the depths of the ocean of milk (*kṣīra-sāgara*). So He arranged for the churning of the milky ocean in which, according to mutual consent, both the gods and the demons participated. Mount Mandāra became the 'churning rod' and the

snake-king Vāsuki became the 'rope'. After great effort the doctor of the heavens Dhanvantari finally brought *amṛta* in a golden pot (*kumbha*). According to *Bhāgavata* it was the Asuras, and according to other Purāṇas it was the Devas, who took away the sacred pot of immortality to drink it themselves. In the course of carrying it, they placed the pot at

four places: Prayag, Hardwar, Ujjain and Nasik. These places thus became sacred because, like the 'Malaya breeze transforming all trees into sandalwood trees,' the touch of the sacred pot made them holy.

The other version of the story is that Indra's son Jayanta took the pot away and carried it to the gods in heaven. It took twelve days for him to reach heaven, and on the way he placed the sacred vessel at the four places mentioned above, and they became places bestowing immortality.

Therefore bathing in any of these four holy places purifies the soul of all its impurities and makes one immortal. India is a sacred land and, legends or no legends, its soil, waters, and the air itself, are all holy.

What is the significance of Kumbha Melā according to astrology? The other very important significance of Kumbha Melā is from the astrological point of view. Here again we have two slightly variant versions. The first one (in the case of Prayag) is that in the month of Pauśa, when the sun and moon enter the zo-



Lord Dhanwantari, the physician of the gods, with the pot of nectar

diac Capricorn (*makara rāṣi*), and when Brhaspati enters the zodiac Scorpio (*vr̥ścika rāṣi*), a unique stellar combination takes place—the sun and moon together at the auspicious sign of *makara* and the guru of the gods at *vr̥ścika*—and this sacred period is called *kumbha yoga* or *puṣkara yoga*.

The second version according to astrological viewpoint is from the *Skanda Purāṇa*:

*Makarastho yadā bhānus-
tadā deva-gurur-yadi;
Pūrṇimāyām bhānuvāre
gaṅgā-puṣkara iritaḥ.
Gaṅgā-dvāre prayāge ca
koṭi-sūrya-grahaiḥ samaḥ.*

'When both Sun and Brhaspati (guru) unite at the Capricorn (*makara*) zodiac on a Sunday which is a full-moon day, the holy river Ganga becomes *puṣkara* (nectarine) at two places on such a grand occasion: Prayag and Hardwar. And such an extraordinary celestial co-incidence is so sacred that it is equal to ten million solar eclipses.'

We know that to the Hindus, celestial occurrences like the solar eclipses are occasions for intense spiritual practice, when bathing in sacred rivers and performing *pūja*, *japa*, meditation, etc, are considered extremely meritorious. When a rare occasion arises once in twelve years, which is equal to a million solar eclipses, one can imagine how sacred it could be.

Is there any other version about the origin of Kumbha Melā? In a beautiful article written 71 years ago in *Viśvavāṇi* (Bengali, Māgh 1336), Brahmachari Akshaya Chaitanya says: 'I believe that when Brhaspati enters the Aquarius zodiac (*kumbha rāṣi*), Kumbha Melā is held at Hardwar. Imitating this event, the

same name is given to festivals held at other three places also.' This argument, however, doesn't appear convincing. In *Sacred Shrines and Cities* (G. Natesan and Co, 1940), it is said: 'Once a year, when the sun enters the sign of Kumbha there is a big festival called *Mahāmelā* which attracts numerous worshippers. ... Once in twelve years there is *Kumbhamelā*...' (p. 352). In one another version, Kumbha Melā is considered a fertility festival (see *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1973). In former times pots containing grains were dipped into the holy rivers to increase their fertility during the occasion.

Considering all these points, we may define Kumbha Melā as a unique spiritual festival held once in twelve years at different times in four sacred places of India—Prayag, Hardwar, Ujjain and Nasik—when certain rare celestial confluences occur. This festival chiefly concerns ceremonial bathing in the sacred rivers of these places, which purify the soul of its sins and bestow immortality because the sacred nectarine kumbha has touched these places.

What will take place next month is *pūrṇa* (lit. 'complete') Kumbha

Melā, which comes once in twelve years. The divine arrangement is such that within twelve years, at equal intervals, Pūrṇa Kumbha Melās are held once at all the four sacred places. Then there are the *ardha* (lit. 'half') Kumbha Melās at Prayag and Hardwar, which come once in six years. Thus, within a period of twelve years, there will be six Kumbha Melās in different parts of India.

What is the history and tradition of Kumbha Melā? To find the origin of this great event is beyond the scope of history, but that it was being practised even during the pre-Buddhist era is known. The only thing that can



Sadhus in traditional attire and paraphernalia leading a procession

be said of its historicity is, Kumbha Melā has been taking place since time immemorial. So far as the tradition is concerned, the main ritual is ceremonial bathing: At the appointed hour, when the celestial *kumbha* or *puṣkara* yoga occurs, people take ceremonial bath in the rivers, purifying their souls of all impurities.

What do we gain by participating in the Kumbha Melā? First the holy bath. The *Matsya Purāṇa* says:

*Māghe māsi gamiṣyanti
gaṅgā-yamuna-saṁgamam;
Gavāṁ śata-sahasrasya
samyak-dattasya yatphalam.
Prayāge māghamāse vai
tryaham snātasya tatphalam.*

'By taking bath in the holy confluence of Gangā and Yamunā at Prayag for three days in the month of Māgha, one attains the same merit as when one donates a thousand cows ceremoniously.' **Second**, the ceremonial bathing apart, there are spiritual discourses, religious meetings,

scriptural readings, worship in temples, *kīrtan* and *bhajan* singing, Vedic chanting, offering oblations, meditation, prayers, serving the poor, etc. If a sincere soul attends a Kumbha Melā once, the whole event should bring about a great transformation in him or her, and there should be spiritual awakening in the heart. This is because, millions of devotees from different parts of the globe assemble at the holy place, and think of God. The air is surcharged with spiritual vibration. It is not an ordinary occurrence at all. **Third**, the Hindu ideal is that this human birth is a magnificent blessing, since it is a steppingstone to spiritual illumination and liberation. Immersed as we

are in our daily tasks, we tend to forget our ideals and become engrossed in the trap of delusion. So we become bound and suffer terribly. Great events like Kumbha Melā, taking place at regular intervals at four different corners of the holy land, bring to our mind that we are here to seek God or Truth. **Fourth**, if we can participate in all the four Kumbha Melās within a period of twelve years, we would have covered most of the pilgrim centres of India. There is another view also: Perhaps there used to be only one Kumbha Melā in very ancient times, which catered to the spiritual needs of numerous people then. But as population grew and people spread over to different regions, the sages must have decided to hold Kumbha Melās at different regions to

benefit all people. **Fifth**, this is the one festival where anyone irrespective of caste or creed can participate. Everyone can take bath in the river. **Sixth**, we come to an important merit of participating in the Kumbha Melā now.

What was Śaṁkara's contribution to Kumbha

Melā? It is said that Śaṁkara, the founder of the *daśanāmī* monastic institution, called upon the monks to participate in the Melā so that they could meet monks from different orders, take ceremonial bath, discuss scriptural truths, teach assembled devotees the methods of sadhana and the glory of spiritual life, and themselves become blessed. He wanted sort of a religious parliament to take place occasionally. Monasticism is the heart of religions, specially Hindu, and the presence of the all-renouncing monks and nuns makes any religious event glorious. At every Pūrṇa Kumbha Melā, thousands of monks from different orders assemble, go in procession, take ceremo-



Ramakrishna Mission sadhus participating in the procession

nial bath, hold religious seminars and discourses, initiate aspirants into monastic life, inspire people to lead holy lives, and bring about a spiritual fervour everywhere.

What are the different orders of monks that take part in the Kumbha Melā? Of the different orders of monastics taking part, the *daśanāmī* Sannyāsins, the Vaiṣṇava Bairāgis, the Nānakpanthī Udāsis, the Sikh Nirmalās, the yogis, the Kabirpanthīs, etc, are important. The famous Nāgā sadhus who roam about clad in sky belong to the *daśanāmī* group itself. It should be noted that Sannyāsins are divided into two large groups, Paramahansa and Nāgā. 'Nāgā' has nothing to do with snakes but it is a derivative of 'nagna', to remain naked. The Nāgā sadhus, who attract attention at every Kumbha Melā, are Advaitins like the Paramahansas. They say that this so-called fierce-looking and spirited Nāgā group came into being in order to face the terror that alien rulers had created to *sanātana dharma*. The aspirants who are intent upon becoming Nāgā monks are divided into two groups: *Alekhiyās* and *Avadhūtas*.

The Nāgās and Paramahansas are divided into four (sometimes seven) *akhāḍas* or associations. They are: *aṭal*, *nirvāṇī* (to which Ramakrishna Order monks belong), *nirāñjanī* (worshippers of Lord Niranjana), and *jūnā* (worshippers of guru Dattātreya, who have nuns also within their fold). The other three *akhāḍas* are *ānanda*, *āvāhan*, and *agan* (*agni*).

There is a regular method in which the monks take bath at the appointed time during Kumbha Melā. The monastics (including Paramahansas and Nāgās) of different *akhāḍas* divide themselves into suitable groups

under a chief (*maṇḍaleśvara*), and go towards the river in a procession. At Prayag, it is the *nirvāṇī akhāḍa* that leads the procession. They are followed by monastics from other orders, like *bairāgis* (who are dualists and belong to at least four schools of philosophy, like those of Rāmānuja, Nimbārka, etc), *udāsis* (which sect was founded by Guru Nānak's son Śrīchand; *udāsis* are chiefly non-dualists), *nirmalās* (whose origin relates to Guru Gobind Singhji, and they adore Śrī Guru Granth Sāhib and sing *śabads*), Dādūpanthīs, Kabirpanthīs, etc.

What about certain peculiarities we notice at such Melās? It's a sight for the gods to see when thousands of all-renouncing monastics go in procession, and devotees assemble in thousands to witness this. Undoubtedly,



Sadhu Sammelan (convention) hosted by the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Kankhal, at the 1998 Kumbha Mela

such huge congregations are occasions for frauds, cheats and beggars to mint money, and this is not peculiar to any one religion. However, some westernized puritans feel uneasy at the way monks of certain orders move about and behave, specially at Kumbha Melās. These puritans wish these monks to be dignified, with gentlemen's wear and behaviour. To such people, we quote from Swamiji's famous poem, *The Song of the Sannyasin*:

Heed then no more how body lives or goes,
... Let one put garlands on, another kick
This frame; say naught. ... Have thou no home.
What home can hold thee, friend?
The sky thy roof, the grass thy bed; and food
What chance may bring, ... judge not.
... Few only know the truth. The rest will hate
And laugh at thee, great one; but pay no heed.
Without the fear of pain or search for pleasure, go
Beyond them both, Sannyasin bold! Say—

"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

What is the importance of Prayag or Allahabad? This time's Kumbha Melā is being held at Prayag (*prayāga*). The Bengali *Viśvakośa* defines Prayag thus: '*Prakṛṣṭo yāgo yāgaphalaṁ yasya yasmāt vā*, where we get the greatest fruit of our good works or sacrifices.' In the *Matsya Purāṇa* six chapters are devoted to eulogizing the glory of Prayag. It says: '*Prayāgaṁ sma-ramānasya yānti pāpāni saṁkṣayam*, just by remembering Prayag a million sins are destroyed.' There are six Prayags—Rudra Prayag, Karna Prayag, etc—but this Prayag is the most important one. There is a beautiful saying in Bengali: '*Prayāge mudāyīya māttha morge pāpi jothā tathā*, shave your head at Prayag, O sinner, and die wherever you will.' That is, even the greatest sinner is saved or is freed from sins once he shaves his head in Prayag.

What is Trivenī Saṅgama?

Prayag is the meeting place of three great rivers: Gangā, Yamunā and Saraswatī. All the three have been mentioned in the Vedas. The river **Saraswatī** has been called 'the greatest of all mothers, the greatest of all rivers, and the greatest of all goddesses (*ambitame naditame devitame saraswatī*).' She has been praised in numerous hymns in the Vedas, and most of the sacrifices of the Vedic sages took place on its banks. Saraswatī, though not flowing on the holy land of Bhārata these days, has mingled with the other two as a subterranean stream. The river **Gangā** was initially flowing in the heavens; it was Bhagiratha who brought it down. It ran down from the top of Lord Śiva's head. Just a drop of the river Gangā is enough to purify a person. Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi adored the river Gangā all her life. Sri Ramakrishna called the river *brahmavārī*.



Monks belonging to various sects attending the convention

Though purest, Swami Vivekananda would nevertheless sprinkle a drop of Gangā water on his lips to become 'pure' even while in the West. The river **Yamunā** is Kṛṣṇa's favourite river and he played as a boy on its banks. A place where such great rivers unite, called *Trivenī Saṅgama* ('triple-braid confluence'), should certainly be the holiest of holies.

How many avatars have visited Prayag?

Prayag is holy in several other senses also. Manu (2.17) says: 'The region lying between the divine rivers Saraswatī and Dṛṣadvatī has been created by the gods and is called *Brahmāvarta*.' So Prayag is the holy *Brahmāvarta*. The *Matsya Purāṇa* affirms this: '*Etat prajāpateḥ kṣetram triṣu lōkeṣu viśrutam*, Prayag is famous in the three worlds as the abode of Brahmā.'

According to the *Purāṇas*, the Hindu trinity, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, reside in the spiritual sense in Prayag: Brahmā as the Śālmali tree at Pratiṣṭhan, Śiva as the undying banyan at Prayag (which was unfortunately cut down by Jahangir; it is indeed undying because its

shoots show leaves often), and Viṣṇu as Mādhava in a temple there.

Of the avatars, Rāma and Sitā visited Prayag to meet sage Bharadvāja. Lord Kṛṣṇa is said to have visited it. The Buddha taught his message here. Śaṁkara of course visited this place. Śrī Caitanya visited Prayag and got a great disciple in Rūpa Goswāmī here. Sri Ramakrishna 'bathed in the holy confluence and stayed there for three nights. Mathur and all others shaved their heads there according to scriptural injunctions, but the Master did not do so (as it was not necessary for him)...' (*Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master*, 1978, p. 313). Holy Mother visited Prayag and offered the

sacred hair and nair-parings of Sri Ramakrishna at the *trivenī*. Swami Vivekananda and other brother disciples visited the holy place.

Apart from these spiritual luminaries, the Pāṇḍavas visited Prayag. The book *Sacred Shrines and Cities* gives excellent details about the significance of Prayag or Allahabad. Emperor Aśoka had erected a pillar during the 3rd century BC at Kausumbī, which was removed to the Allahabad fort; Jahangir is said to have inscribed something on the same pillar. Jahangir is also famous for trying to uproot the immortal tree, *akṣaya vaṭa*; the more he tried to cut it and pour molten lead, the more its shoots sprang up. He is said to have exclaimed: 'Lo! The tree of Hinduism will not die!' Incidentally, the name 'Allahabad' comes from 'Ilāhā-bād', derived from Akbar's new religion, *Din-i-lāhi*. It was at Prayag that Akbar founded the unifying religion; he also rebuilt the city and called it 'Illahabad'. Hsuan-tsang visited Prayag and participated in the Kumbha Melā. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1973) writes that he along with Emperor Harsavardhana attended the Melā. Apart from all these, Prayag is famous for its holy men; for thousands of years now, innumerable monks have performed great many austerities around the holy confluence. It is at such a unique place on earth that Kumbha Melā will be held next month.

What are the important events and dates of this Kumbha Melā? This time there are five important dates. Kumbha Melā begins on Tuesday, 9 January 2001 (Pauśa, Pūrṇimā). On this full-moon night, there will be **Total Lunar Eclipse**, visible in Asia, Australia and other places. The eclipse will begin at 12.12.00 hours midnight and end at 2.21.36 hours (ie, 10th morning).

The second important date is Sunday, 14 January 2001, (30 Pauśa, Pañcamī), which is the sacred **Makara Saṁkrānti** occasion. It is the time of *Māgha snāna* and the first main day of Kumbha Melā (*prathama śāhi snāna*).

The third important date is Wednesday, 24 January 2001 (10 Māgha, Amāvāsyā), **Maunī Amāvāsyā**. It is the second main day of Kumbha Melā (*dvitīya śāhi snāna*).

The fourth important date is Monday, 29 January 2001 (15 Māgha, Pañcamī), **Vasanta Pañcamī**. Saraswatī (and Lakṣmī) Pūjā day. The third main day of Kumbha Melā (*trītiya śāhi snāna*).

Finally, Thursday, 8 February 2001 (25 Māgha, Pūrṇimā), is **Māghī Pūrṇimā**. Kumbha Melā virtually ends on this day. But Wednesday, 21 February 2001 (9 Phālguna, Trayodaśī/Caturdaśī) is **Mahā Śivarātrī** and this too is important.

Conclusion: At least 50 million people are expected to congregate at the holy Prayag this time. The Government has made elaborate arrangements, though during some earlier occasions their arrangement was slipshod. During the 1954 Melā for instance, at least 500 people passed away. Numerous non-governmental institutions are gearing up to help the pilgrims to the best of their ability. **The Ramakrishna Math, Allahabad, has made adequate arrangements to accommodate monks and devotees coming with prior understanding.** It has also arranged for an exhibition, Satsang Pandal, medical camps, etc.

Let us all pray fervently that this great event may pass off peacefully, without any calamity—natural or man-made—and bring spiritual well-being to everyone who takes part in it. □

Nothing real can be achieved in the field of religion by mere talk. It is a thing to be practised—with all the intensity of life and soul. We can never hope to attain even a bit of religion if we rest contented by simply making a verbal reproduction of the teachings of our scriptures like a talking machine and make no further move.

—Swami Premananda

The Spirit of Christmas

REV MICHAEL STEEVES

Reverend Michael Steeves is the Provincial Coordinator, Chaplaincy Services of the province of Ontario, Canada. He works also for the Ontario Multifaith Council for Spiritual and Religious Care, which provides care for the inmates of hospitals, prisons, etc. Reverend Steeves is in close touch with the Vedanta Society of Toronto, where he gave a talk sometime back. Here's the beautiful talk, a Christmas tribute.

I feel a little inadequate in the sense that I am aware of how much I have to learn about other faiths, in particular about your own [ie, Vedanta]. **I hope that my Christian background is broadening out through my contact with other faith groups and the diverse ways in which they express their faith.**

I have always been encouraged and helped by the open and universal approach of Vedanta. A few years ago, I spoke here about Easter. We had a very stimulating discussion then about resurrection and reincarnation. I think I learnt a lot more than I imparted, and I am here once again to share some thoughts with you, but also to learn from you. My purpose today is to better understand the meaning of the spirit of Christmas. And I think I can best do that by listening to what others who are sympathetic to Christianity say about it. You blew me away when you began this service by singing a Christmas carol, one of my favourite carols. And I feel very happy to share some thoughts with you and I hope that you will also let me hear your views. Please feel free to guide me if I say something wrong.

Many people casually greet me around this time of year by asking, 'Do you have the spirit of Christmas?' The Christmas spirit means different things to different people. To many it means to get into the mood of the holidays and the celebration, getting together with family and friends. For those of us who are pursuing a spiritual path, it means to understand the relevance of this occasion to our spiritual life.

If we want to understand the spirit of Christmas, I think we should try to get beyond all the things that are wrong with the Christmas season and try to see what is right about it. We have to get beyond the immense amount of commercial emphasis that takes place around this time of year. Nothing could be more right than giving and exchanging gifts. The wise men brought gifts for the child Christ. We give gifts to loved ones. But people take it to such extremes. Is Christmas just about giving gifts? Let us go back and recall the story of the birth of Christ.

I can't over-emphasize the importance of stories in any faith. The telling, recounting, and sharing of stories is very important. A spiritual story is told to convey a deep and eternal truth. We are all trying to move towards an understanding of truth. The Christmas story is one of tremendous encouragement and contains some very helpful truths.

I am sure that many of you are familiar with the story of the birth of Christ. Those who have not had the opportunity to do so might read the description which is given in the Gospels. The *Gospel of St Luke* describes not one, but two miraculous births, the one of Jesus and the one of his cousin, John the Baptist. I am a Baptist, and so I kind of like this story. John the Baptist was an ascetic who lived in the desert, and he preached the gospel of turning to God. He was a very disciplined and deeply spiritual man. His birth was also miraculous as his mother Elizabeth was rather old. The meeting of Mary and Elizabeth is very touching and I

encourage you to read it in the Gospels.

The birth of Christ is a wonderful, beautiful and compelling story. It caught the imagination of millions, even billions of people. There is nothing which impacts us the same way as the birth of a child. I am a grandfather and I still marvel at that. The birth of a child, any child, changes the world and it is a truly special event. In most cases, this is a very positive change in the world. I think it is most important that our God—and I believe we share the same God—chooses to impact the world through the simplicity of the birth of a child. There are wars and political catastrophes and natural disasters—all very important events, which are shaping the world. But God chooses to impact the world through the simple birth of a child. And this child was not waving a sabre. He was not made into a warrior. He was raised in a simple carpenter's home, but through the force of his spirituality and his mind, and his teachings about peace he had such a tremendous impact on all of us and on the world. He taught eternal truths.

What do we learn from this? It brings us a spark of hope in a very difficult time. Even in our family life, in our darkest and most troubled time, whatever that difficulty comes from, there seems to be something which keeps us hopeful, that life is good and God cares for us. These folks two thousand years ago were in a very difficult time. They were poor and they were constantly being exploited by their rulers. Joseph's family was probably reasonably prosperous. Yet many people did not have enough. But this miraculous birth brought them hope. It is like a tender shoot of a plant that grows into such a mighty tree that it can split rocks and overcome obstacles.

There is also a message of peace. One of the things emphasized at Christmas time is peace and we certainly need it in the world today. We need peace between nations and religions, but we also need to discover peace within ourselves and discover a path to eternal

peace. If we have not found peace with God, we cannot be at peace with each other. Thank God for the worshipping communities throughout the world who have discovered peace.

There is also the message of joy and celebration. It is not always easy to be joyful. But this story teaches us that it is possible to work through our pain, whether it is caused by a personal loss, or a crisis such as a war, and discover satisfaction and joy. Also from this story, we learn a way to salvation. The angel announced that the Saviour was born. But there is another passage in the Bible which I think is very wise. It says, 'Work out your own salvation, with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you.' As I meet people of all faiths, I discover that they are working out their own salvation and often with awe, and fear and trembling—because God is so great and God is so good, and they realize that it is God who is at work in us. The whole story is about gifts, about joy, about salvation but mostly a story about love. God is love, and He loves us and shows His love to us in so many ways, both profound and simple.

The mistake that I think we Christians make, and I thank God that you do not make this mistake, is to think that the Christ story is the only story. It is a mistake to think that if you don't accept the Christ story, then you are on the wrong path. It is wonderful to be captivated by the Christ story and to be inspired by it, as I am, but it is a mistake to say that that is the only story. God is greater than any one story and any one path. That is what I like about Vedanta, for it calls on us to go beyond that and to discover the great truths in all faiths. It helps us to come together and to discover that we are all one. God is one, God is love, God is everything. How we find that is really quite varied and quite rich and when we talk to each other, we can help each other and enrich each other. □

An Exercise in Interreligious Harmony

UMESH C. GULATI

Mr Umesh Gulati from Greenville, USA, asserts that dialogue is the way to bring about the much-needed religious harmony. And harmony leads to peace.

It's usually said that the world has become increasingly interdependent. Political turmoil and instability in one country becomes a threat to peace in others, and economic recession in one country affects many others simultaneously. People the world over are becoming so interconnected that we truly live in a global village. As a result, almost all our secular problems—of war and peace, environment and terrorism, etc—are addressed through dialogue and mutual cooperation.

Strangely though, on matters of the spirit there doesn't seem to be a common ground. It is true that holy wars and crusades are things of the past, and people of various faiths live and work together. That, however, is not religious harmony. As the Harvard University professor Diana Eck has said, such tolerance may in fact be a passive form of hostility. Christians may tolerate their Jewish neighbours and protect their civil liberties without having to know anything about them. Tolerance may often stand in the way of active engagement and understanding of one another's faith. Moreover, it's a strange fact that we preach harmony of religions to only those people who are naturally inclined towards harmony.

Religious harmony according to Gandhiji is to accord the same respect for the others' religious faiths as we grant to our own, thus admitting imperfections, if any, in ours. The Vedas declared: 'Truth is one, sages call It by various names.' Sri Ramakrishna said: 'As many faiths, so many paths.' Notice that his stress was on the fact that various religions are so many paths leading to the same Reality.

What is that Reality? The Hindu seers and incarnations, and prophets of all religions

had direct and intuitive awareness of the ultimate Reality. But they couldn't adequately express their personal experiences. This is because, to express what is beyond thought and words is a difficult task. No wonder, then, that Meister Eckhart said to someone who was praising God: 'Why dost thou prate of God? Whatever thou sayest of Him is untrue.' Sri Ramakrishna said the same thing:

What Brahman is cannot be described. All things in the world—the Vedas, the Puranas, the Tantras, the six systems of philosophy—have been defiled, like food that has been touched by the tongue, for they have been read or uttered by the tongue. Only one thing has not been defiled in this way, and that is Brahman. No one has ever been able to say what Brahman is [M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2000), p. 102].

Since there is one God, there must be one true religion. But passing through the human medium, it becomes many. All religions are true and so no religion can claim an exclusive monopoly of the religious Truth. The harmony of religions tends to reveal more fully the glory of the ultimate Reality than a single religion by itself.

Harmony of religions, however, does not concern itself in the founding of a worldwide temple of all faiths, or of a new religion, by fusing diverse elements of different traditions. Rather, as Swami Vivekananda said, it implies that there are as many religions as there are people, and is the same thing as religious pluralism or religious democracy. It also means learning from whatever appears to us in every religion, assimilating its knowledge, and manifesting it in our daily lives. In other

words, it stresses the transforming of our character and integrating the sacred with the secular, thereby making prospects for world peace more certain.

It follows that religion, as Gandhiji said, is essentially a personal matter, and requires no outside force or inducement to change. Therefore proselytizing is the antithesis of religious democracy and harmony. Regardless of many evangelists' assertion of their duty to 'save' the lost souls of other faiths, proselytizing is nothing but what Aldous Huxley calls a 'theological imperialism.' It's the religious equivalent of the cold war, and is dangerous to world peace. It corrupts the religious life in any society. In an interview with C.F. Andrews, a missionary, Gandhiji said that he liked a Hindu reading the Bible and being inspired by it, 'but why should he discard his own religion?'

Harmony of religions doesn't imply being unfaithful to one's own religion. On the contrary, being truly faithful to our own religious tradition requires us to be alert to its faults and to find proper remedies to them. To achieve such a religious harmony it is incumbent upon us to enter into a friendly dialogue with people of various religions, which means that we must carefully listen to what others have to say. People of all religions should come forward to participate in the dialogue in a friendly way and not of one particular faith only. For dialogue is not the same as debate which forces us to deliberately misrepresent the position of the other side to score a point; it is rather a truth-seeking process which helps us understand not only the other's position but also ourselves and our faith more clearly. It also goes beyond mere understanding to a new level of mutual self-understanding, making us better in our own faith. Since religious harmony is crucial for maintaining world peace, and dialogue is the best means to achieve it, it is important that we understand its mechanics by a real world case study.

One of the reasons for religious disharmony is that each religion tries to interpret

another in terms of its own tradition. The Christian view [which is being altered in some quarters] that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God and that salvation is impossible unless we accept that position, is solely based on the theology of the Old Testament, its view of the creation of the world, the picture it paints of sin, and its promise of a saviour whose sacrifice on the cross will bring salvation to man. We should also note another Judaic premise, the notion of time. Time in the Judaic theology is static and discrete; it was created, and will end. Within these two points of time, the process of history is dynamic. There is only one chance for us to fulfil our destiny. The Hindu view of the cosmos is different. Time according to the Hindu tradition is dynamic and continuous. There is neither creation of time nor end of time, as reality never ceases to exist. It is relative too. It is *maya*, which is not illusion, but the kinetic aspect of Reality. Besides, all beings are subject to reincarnation. Until one has worked out one's accumulated karma, he or she continues to reincarnate. Once the bondage of karma is gone, one attains freedom from the clutches of *maya* and attain *moksha*.

Salvation and *moksha*, however, are not the same. Whereas 'salvation' refers to a person's posthumous entry into heaven on a particular day in history for indefinite personal survival, *moksha* is enlightenment and can occur here and now, when one intuitively realizes that he or she is not this body but the Self, which is ever pure, perfect and immortal, and is identical with Brahman. While life in heaven is still one of separateness and multiplicity, *moksha* allows one to have unitive knowledge of Brahman and total merger into It. Just as there is this upward ascent of consciousness, there is also a descent of God on earth, taking the human form without being bound by karma and having the power to liberate beings enchained by karmas. The purpose of divine incarnation is not to redeem human beings from their original sin but to remove their ignorance about their divine nature and to lead them to God.

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Vedānta and Tantra

The Two Great Streams

BABAJI BOB KINDLER

Babaji Bob Kindler, who heads the SRV Center, Hawaii, has dedicated his life to Vedānta. He has written several books, including Avadhut and His Twenty-four Teachers in Nature and Mother Kali, and is Editor, The Nectar of Non-dual Truth quarterly.

Vedānta, the conclusion of the Vedas, with its broad and vast scope of spiritual treasure, comprises the Upaniṣads—revelations received by ancient ṛṣis while plunged in profound and transcendental states of subtle awareness. Yet what they received and passed on is pure non-dual Truth, unencumbered by anything resembling a path or a way. We are hard put to find a practice in the Upaniṣads, and instead draw back in awe to contemplate essential, pearl-like statements which are assertions of the existence of something so full and expansive that it deifies description by any system of spiritual discipline. Measuring ourselves against the capacious expanse of that eternal Truth, however, we soon find how far we have fallen from the ideal and how much nonessential weight we need to shed in order to maintain ourselves in the pure light of this pristine atmosphere. This assessment begins the process of sadhana, the phase of discipline so necessary to those who experience the embodied condition subject to *māyā*.

Clarification of the Great Master's New Dispensation

Tantra, especially associated with primal Mother worship and ancient Śiva worship, is a broad and honourable system that, according to some, is as old as the Vedas and probably older. Images of Paśupati—the oldest name for Śiva recorded in the Vedas—were unearthed at the ancient excavation sites in Harappa and Mohenjodaro. In the light of this and other discoveries, it is possible that forms of Tantric worship comprised the religion of

the indigenous peoples of the Indus Valley long before the migrations of the Aryan race and the resultant Vedic period. What is more, indications of ascetic practices such as concentration as well as altars, *liṅgams*, conchs, sacrificial posts and even the image of Garuḍa were among the finds in these ancient cities. Since many of these practices and articles are common to the Vedic rituals, this shows a connection and suggests that Tantra could predate the Vedas. Whatever the case may be, these two great streams, the Vedic and the Tantric, are receiving a welcome reconciliation and integration in this day and age due to the advent of Sri Ramakrishna.

When we study *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, we find that though Sri Ramakrishna taught the truths contained in the Upaniṣads, he illustrated these principles by methods that are often Tantric in origin and flavour. His worship of and devotion to Mother Kālī, Śrī Kṛṣṇa, Mother Sitā, Lord Caitanya and Lord Śiva reveal his wonderful Tantric nature and indicate many diverse ways of practising the Vedic truths. The lineage and religion we follow, then, are replete with the presence of images of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Gaṇapati and, importantly, Durgā and Kālī. Therefore if we carefully examine the life and message of Sri Ramakrishna we see that the children of Sri Ramakrishna are Vaidikas in essence and Tantrikas by path and process, and these two are happily married in the Advaitic perspective. As Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, stated: 'Inasmuch as our guru, Sri Ramakrishna, is an

Advaitin, and you are his disciples, you are all Advaitins. I may emphatically declare that you are all necessarily Advaitins.'

Our Spiritual Forefathers

The great sages of the past taught the *darśanas*—systems of revelation that have kept us close to God over many centuries. The great Ṛṣi Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreyi, Agastya and his wife Lopāmudrā who were initiates of the Divine Mother path, Dūrvāsa who taught Śrī Kṛṣṇa the sixty-four Advaita *kalās*, Dattātreya the great sage and yogi who was devoted to the Divine Mother, Sanat-kumāra, Dadhici, Viśvāmitra and many others—all were Tantric practitioners. It is interesting to note that most of these Vedic seers were married practitioners, and it is no less revealing to look at the Advaitic era of Śrī Śaṁkara. Though he was an exponent of the Vedic path, he, his guru Gauḍapāda and his *paramaguru* Govindapāda were devotees and worshippers of both the Mother of the Universe and of Lord Śiva and therefore could be called Tantric adepts as well. Though the Vaidika monastic stream ran strong there, no less than nine of Śaṁkara's fourteen direct disciples were not only householders but adherents of the Tantric *samayācāra* Śiva/Śakti path like their guru and *paramaguru*.

Who are We, and What is the Way?

We are Vedantists, as Swami Vivekananda foresaw and provided for, but our path is tinged with Tantricism. Vedanta, strictly speaking, is not a path but a statement of the absolute Truth. Even its *neti, neti* aspect is less method than pure one-pointed self will, coupled with realization. The path and its many ways, the processes by which beings remember the Ātman, their true nature, lie in Tantra. We may make the assertion that Yoga is our method or path as well, and that is true, but given the pre-Vedic origin of Paśupati Śiva, it must be recognized that Yoga had its earliest birth from the Tantric stream and later got systematized by Patañjali. Authentic Yoga, far from being the caricature of the same that is practised today only as a physical, body-ori-

ented system, finds its higher expressions in the *kuṇḍalinī* aspect of Śaktism and Śaivism. Additionally, in Vaiṣṇavism, Kṛṣṇa presents Yoga in many practicable forms in various chapters of the *Bhagavadgītā* while as direct method it emerges through the Pātañjala system which, unlike the *haṭha yoga*, is authentic tradition focused on the highest goal.

Yoga, Vedanta and Tantra owe much of their basis and growth to the Sāṁkhya philosophy which enumerates the twenty-four cosmic principles as a basis for the universal manifestation. This steady foundation assisted in the presentation of the life-giving, life-transforming declarations of the Vedas. Due to this structure, the Tantra of a later period gave birth to the many wonderful methods through which to realize the Truth contained in the Vedas and over time graced the Sāṁkhya system with twelve additional principles (*mahātattvas*) of a higher and purer order. After the Sāṁkhya was well-established, Patañjali was able to more readily produce and propound his *Yoga Sūtras*, providing another well-defined pathway containing numerous tools capable of clearing away all the impediments which hamper human beings in their quest for Truth.

To conclude and to integrate, in the *sanātana dharma*—and this term is used here in the widest and deepest sense of the term—Sāṁkhya provides the cosmological structure, Tantra and Yoga offer and define the method and the practice, and Vedanta represents the uncompromising and unalloyed Truth of Being, Knowledge and Bliss Absolute. In this way of thinking, Sāṁkhya is the body, Tantra and Yoga the mind, and Vedanta the soul. All three, integrated together in the non-dual atmosphere of Advaita, represent the supreme path and way. This, clearly comprehended and rightly lived, forms the 'New Dispensation' of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda.

Taking Nothing Apart

In our quest for Truth, which will lead us from words, images, symbols, meanings and

modes of worship directly to the radiant vision of the incomparable faces of the Blessed Lord and Divine Mother of the universe, we must look beyond mere historical context. Judging things only on a moralistic basis from the often onerous standpoint of distinctions like superior and inferior, and applying exacting and sterile analysis should not form the only purpose for involving ourselves in a quest for Truth, for Truth dwarfs and transcends process. In fact, Truth is not a process or a path at all, but the very divine atmosphere of the blessed One whom all beings seek to unite with. As my guru, Swami Aseshananda, used to tell us: 'If we knew our essential nature, we would have little need for spiritual disciplines.'

Since this is not the case, however, and we do need to reverse the ill effects of this age of ignorance and its accompanying delusion, a study of the two great streams of Tantra and Vedānta with their main tributaries of Sāṃkhya and Yoga will benefit us greatly. How will this proceed? Piercing the veils of *māyā* in order to apprehend what is real and what is

unreal is the emphasis of Vedānta, so its implementation will destroy ignorance in the mind. Affecting the mind's deification of the world as the play of Śiva and Śakti is the salient feature of the Tantric path, so it is well suited to this age where beings have forgotten that mankind and Mother Earth, seen rightly, are expressions of Brahman's perfection.

When we come to see *māyā* as what it is, neither wholly positive nor purely negative, it will flee from us. Therefore, we must first recognize *māyā* and this means recognizing it in its individual, collective and cosmic aspects. Practise of the Tantra facilitates this and brings us to a pure state where the Divine Mother of the universe—*mahāvidyā* or Bhagavatī Durgā who wields the various powers of *māyā*—will remove the cosmic dust from our inner vision, opening our wisdom eye to the ultimate Reality itself. Thus will that which the Vedānta proclaims be realized by all, for in truth, all religious approaches contain this essence. As a Sufi saint has marvelled: 'When I plucked the fruit of realization from the branch of spiritual practice, I found that the tree was within me.'

An Exercise in Interreligious Harmony

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In the Hindu tradition, the notion of sin is a deviation from the path of virtue on the plane of conduct and morality. In reality neither righteousness nor sin is absolute. In this way, there are many differences as there are meeting points. This does not mean there should be mutual hatred. There should be proper understanding. In a dialogue, we may not reach any formal agreement, but we shall certainly part with better understanding. We should bear in mind that culture and religion are interconnected. The Indian and western forms of music, for instance, are completely different. The notes, rhythm, the beats—all are different. So it is difficult for the average westerner to ap-

preciate Indian music even as an average Indian cannot appreciate western classical music. Similarly, you cannot look at the Hindu faith through Christian glasses and vice versa. In a religiously and linguistically diverse India, cultural unity is the glue that binds the nation together. Religious conversions thus pose a much greater threat to the unity of India than recognized before. As Gandhiji said, it is the duty of every cultured person to read sympathetically the scriptures of all religions. Only this will enable us to understand ideas clearly and to form a well-ordered religious democracy. □

Who were Holy Mother's 'Robber Parents'?

SWAMI PURNATMANANDA

Swami Purnatmanandaji is presently Editor, Udbodhan (Bengali), and a famous scholar in Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature. He has written and edited numerous books. In this modified version of an original Bengali article written in Sri Sri Mayer Padaprantha (Vol. 3), Purnatmanandaji gives us new information about the so-called robber couple who had met Holy Mother Sarada Devi in the barrens of Telo-Bhelo and had become her virtual parents. We thank Smt Kumkum Chakraborty, Department of English, Lady Bethune College, Calcutta, for translating the article for Prabuddha Bharata. Holy Mother's birthday falls on 17 December this year. Purnatmanandaji has approved the translation.

Those who know Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's life are familiar with the incident related to Holy Mother's 'robber parents' (see Swami Gambhiranandaji, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, 1969, pp. 70-3). Once, on her way to Dakshineswar from Jayarambati, Holy Mother fell behind and lost sight of her companions. She was walking slowly, all alone, in the solitary field of Telo-Bhelo, which was notorious for its robbers. It was dark all around when Holy Mother suddenly confronted a man-mountain of dark complexion. She instantly understood that he was a robber. But still, with her inimitable innocence, she addressed him 'father' and told him of her plight: that she was left behind by her companions, and had to go eastward. That man said that she had taken the wrong path. He had a female companion, his wife, and Mother instantly went to her and addressed her as mother. What the couple saw in Holy Mother is not clear, but the robber couple got transformed in an instant. All their harshness was gone and in its place came overwhelming parental feelings towards Holy Mother. They became Holy Mother's parents, caring for her, guarding her, preparing a bed for her, feeding her, singing for her. And when they had to part the next day, both Holy Mother and the robber parents wept bitterly. Holy Mother extracted a promise that they would visit her at Dakshineswar, and they did visit several times with presents to their dear daughter.

Though the robber-couple incident is known, nowhere do we come to hear anything

about the Bagdi parents themselves: their name, residence, etc. However, we have been able to collect some facts about the couple from Holy Mother's two devoted attendants, Swamis Parameswarananda and Gouriswarananda. From them we have learnt that the robber father's name was Sagar Santra (pronounced as *Sāgor Sāntra*). He belonged to Telo or Telua village, one of a pair of villages, the twin being Bhelo or Bhalia village. Telo-Bhelo came under the Samarsahi Pargana, whose landowner in those days was the Maharaja of Burdwan. However, the administration of Samarsahi Pargana was in the hands of the Samanta family of Malaypur which was employed by the Maharaja. Sagar Santra was employed as a guard with a petty landlord, who belonged to the Ghosh family of Telo village. Though occasionally guilty of robbery, the 'robber father' was not a robber by profession.

Swami Parameswarananda told us: 'Long after the Telo-Bhelo incident, when Holy Mother was residing at Jayarambati, a young man of the Bagdi community approached her seeking spiritual initiation. He prayed: "Give me initiation." I was present there at that time. Holy Mother said, "I'm not feeling well; I can't give you initiation now." But the youth thought that Holy Mother was reluctant because he was a Bagdi, a low-caste man. So he spoke to her in an angry tone, in a

voice expressive of wounded affection, "I understand. You can be a Bagdi's daughter but not the mother of one. I'm coming from Telo village. Do you remember your 'Bagdi father'? He is my father." Holy Mother was filled with joy at these words and gave him initiation that very day despite her indisposition.'

We contacted Sagar Santra's grandson (his son's son) Krishnapada Santra and came to know that it was his uncle Mehari Santra who had received initiation from Holy Mother. This he had learnt from his father, Behari Santra. Krishnapada had never seen his uncle because the latter had passed away at the tender age of 20-22, long before his birth. Krishnapada also informed us that the name of Holy Mother's Bagdi mother was Matangini. Sagar Santra's parents were Mathur and Tara Rani. Since he was born on a *makara sankrānti* day, his father had named him Sagar.

Krishnapada never saw his grandfather, but from his own father he learnt that his grandfather was a man of gigantic build, and had immense strength. He had long, black hair on his head. When he rinsed his mouth after supper, the entire neighbourhood would know that Sagar Santra had finished his night meals. Such was the noise he made!

Sagar Santra was an expert in the art of using his long stick. He would rotate it so fast all around him that stones thrown on him would be instantly ricocheted off. Everyone in his locality regarded him with awe on account of his huge stature and great strength. Sagar displayed some acting talent too. He was a regular actor in the village *Krishna Yātrā* troupe. He would enact the roles of Kamsa in *Kamsavadha* and Yama in *Sati Behula*.

Aged residents of Telo-Bhelo village say that though uneducated, Sagar Santra could compose songs extempore for the dramas in which he acted. Three songs he composed have come down to us. In *The Portrait of Sri Sri Ramakrishna* (1998, p. 282; a translation of *Sri Ramakrishna Punthi*), Akshay Kumar Sen writes that the 'robber father' sang one of these songs to Holy Mother on their way to

Tarakeshwar on that eventful evening. The song had pleased Holy Mother much, so she had told Akshay, and had repeated it too. The song began thus: 'Why does my heart weep for one who is not a near and dear one?'

How did this robber father's end come by? In April-May 1910 (or 1911), while cutting down the branch of a *bilva* tree, Sagar Santra fell down and was injured. He succumbed to the head injury. Matangini, his wife, passed away about a decade later.

Professor Tarit Kumar Bandopadhyay, a scholar from Telo village, has studied the robber parents' life and the incident connected with Holy Mother systematically. He has tried to fix an exact date for the famous incident using several works. Indeed there was some confusion, though *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* had clearly stated that the incident took place in January 1877. Some had placed the incident in 1874. After studying various sources, Sri Bandopadhyay has decided upon February 1877 as the month in which Holy Mother met the robber couple near Telo-Bhelo. He has written a book in Bengali titled *Sri Sri Ma O Dakat Baba* in which he has discussed all the points.

The inhabitants of Telo village showed great enthusiasm a few decades back to install Holy Mother's image in their village. The Ramakrishna Sarada Sevashrama, Telo, had been founded sometime back—14 March 1965 to be precise. Swami Parameswarananda's initiative led to the installation of the image of Holy Mother on 3 May 1977 in a small temple that was constructed there. The villagers are quite active; every year, on the occasion of Holy Mother's birthday, spiritual discourses are held there. Sri Bandopadhyay tells us that Swami Parameswarananda had given the specific instruction that the image should reflect Holy Mother at 24 years of age—the age when the Telo-Bhelo event had taken place. He had seen the image of Holy Mother and approved it. Strange as the coincidence may appear to be, the temple with image was dedicated in 1977, exactly 100 years after the event. □

Reminiscences of Mahapurush Maharaj

SWAMI GAMBHIRANANDA

Swami Gambhiranandaji Maharaj's reminiscences of Swami Shivananda (Mahapurush Maharaj), a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, were recounted in a speech delivered at Chandigarh in 1980. Mahapurush Maharaj was the second President of the Ramakrishna Sangha, and Swami Gambhiranandaji was the eleventh President. Swami Shivanandaji's birth anniversary falls on 21 December 2000.

At Belur Math, on a festive occasion, maybe *Dol Purnima*, we young monks were making noise on the ground floor. Swami Shivananda was ailing at that time. Hearing the noise, an attendant of his told him: 'Shall I go and stop them from making noise?' He said, 'No, no. The boys are making merry. Let them continue. They have left their home and parents. Unless they get some occasion for merriment here, how will they live?' That was his loving attitude towards us. When we assembled before him, he would just look at us; if he felt that someone needed a piece of cloth or *chaddar* or some such thing, he would instruct his attendant to give it to the person at once.

Mahapurush Maharaj was very austere. Here's an example of his austerity. There was a landlord from a place called Lalgah, about 80 miles from Calcutta, who was a disciple of Mahapurush Maharaj. One day he came with his son and brought a costly shawl made from camel-hair. Perhaps camel hair shawls are costlier than ordinary ones. I have no idea though; others said so. That gentleman presented the shawl to Mahapurush Maharaj. Shivanandaji said, 'Now bring me a black-bordered cloth and a stick, and I shall go around whistling all the time like a foppish dandy. What do you mean by giving this gift?' He returned the shawl to the landlord's son. That is the kind of

austerity we found in him.

I was working in the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapitha at Deoghar then. We have a big residential high school there today. But in those days it was just a budding institution. There might have been about 15 or 16 boys at that time; and we were a few monks, trying to build up the institution. We had got a new plot of land, about 19 acres. Three small buildings had been put up—one for the kitchen, and two student quarters. The outer walls had not been plastered for want of money. We requested Mahapurushji to inaugurate the buildings. He came one winter. Some eight or ten monks had come with Mahapurush Maharaj.

On that plot of land there was a little raised ground from where the *gopuram* of Baidyanath Shiva temple could be seen. People of the locality would come there, prostrate, and even dance to please Shiva. Some drummers would also come and dance with them to get some remuneration—just one or two pice. One morning Mahapurush Maharaj was taken to that place accompanied by his entourage. There were about five or six monks and 15 boys from the Vidyapitha too. The boys would usually be with Mahapurush Maharaj, talking with him. Four drummers surrounded him there and went on beating their drums; Shivanandaji also went on danc-



ing. My duty was to look after the kitchen. So I was dressing vegetables there when this incident occurred. Of course I could see Mahapurushji dancing and the drummers beating their drums from where I was then. After it was over, he came walking by the side of the kitchen and said, 'I see an expression of *shakti* or power here. In time a great institution will come up here.' During my stay there it was not so big; now it has grown much bigger.

That was winter as I said and Mahapurush Maharaj suffered from asthma. One night his problem became acute. Next morning, when we went to pay respects to him, he was sitting on his bed and told us that he had passed the whole night sitting like that. He was feeling a great pain and discomfort. But then he said, 'Whenever the pain became acute I concentrated my mind on "that one" and all the pain went away.' Swami Omkarananda was there then. He asked, 'What is "that one", Maharaj?' 'Well, that is the Self, the Atman. I concentrated my mind there and all the pain went away.'

After the passing away of Swami Saradanandaji who was very dear to him, Mahapurush Maharaj suffered a shock and became very ill. So, for a change, he went to Madhupur, about 20 miles by train from Deoghar. Another incident happened at this time, when I was still at Deoghar. I was very impractical, I should say. There came a Brahmachari who had been a Congress worker. Being a Congress worker, he was supposed to be very practical. There is a shorter route through the fields, which would be about 18 miles to Madhupur. But that wasn't a regular road. That 'practical' Congress friend of mine said, 'Let us go by bicycle to Madhupur to meet Mahapurush Maharaj. That place has a big railway station and there are rich people, mostly Bengalis, who come for a change from Bengal. So we can collect some money for our Vidyapitha also.' I took his suggestion to be practical: if we go by bicycle, we can move about in the town to collect money. So I followed him on the cycle. It

turned out to be an expedition of sorts: sometimes we had to carry the cycles on our shoulders because there was no road; and we also had to cross a river that way.

When we reached Madhupur, Mahapurushji's secretary, Swami Gangeshananda, said, 'You two have come by cycle; about 10-12 others have come from Deoghar by train. It's all very thoughtless of you. Mahapurush Maharaj is living in somebody else's house as a guest, and you have come to embarrass him as well as the host!' I said, 'All right, Maharaj. We have come to pay our respects to Mahapurush Maharaj. After we have done that, we shall go away. We shall not take food here, we shall take food in the market.' Then he said, 'Don't collect any money hereabouts. It will bring dishonour to Mahapurush Maharaj.' 'All right, we won't collect any money.'

So we went to pay our respects to Mahapurushji. My name then was Saumyachaitanya. Mahapurushji would quote from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* whenever I met him: '*Sadeva saumya idamagra āsit*, In the beginning, O good one, That alone existed.' He uttered that sentence this time too and welcomed us. I said, 'Maharaj, we had come to make our obeisance. We depart now.' 'No, no, how can you do that? It is noon. You must take food.' I said, 'Maharaj, it will be embarrassing to you. We are a rather big group.' 'No, no, it does not matter,' he retorted.

The owner of the house was sitting there. He said, 'You are all welcome. Eat here and then return.' So we had a very nice lunch. We did not collect money but came back by bicycle: sometimes we rode them, sometimes the bicycles rode on us. That was an experience indeed!

After staying at Madhupur for some time, Mahapurush Maharaj went to Varanasi and stayed there at the Advaita Ashrama. We were blessed with sannyasa vows there, in 1928, on Swamiji's birthday. I have said earlier that Shivanandaji was suffering from asthma and other diseases since the passing away of Saradanandaji. One morning, when we went

to see him, he said, 'Well, last night I was feeling like dying. But then, a white figure came there and touched my body and said, "No, you cannot depart now. You have many more things to do."' He seemed to have had a vision of Shiva himself. That kind of experience he had frequently.

He had once been to Ooty, Tamil Nadu. One day, he was sitting in his room in our Ashrama there and looking out of the window. Soon he felt as though his Self went out of his body and spread over the whole area and became identified with the surroundings. After coming back to Belur Math he narrated this experience to us one day. I was also present there. It was a thrilling experience, and the narration was equally thrilling.

Somebody asked him one day, 'Who amongst you were the *Iswarakotis*?' As you know, Sri Ramakrishna used that term. *Iswarakoti* means one belonging to the divine class. Swamiji, Swami Brahmanandaji, Swami Premanandaji and others were of this class. But Mahapurushji's reply was, 'He has made us also *Iswarakotis*.'

If somebody asked him, 'Swamiji, please tell us some incidents from your life,' he would say, 'The greatest incident in my life was that I came to the lotus feet of Sri Ramakrishna, that I found shelter there. That was the greatest incident in my life.' He was humble. If anyone requested him to speak about Sri Ramakrishna, he would reply, 'You see, we lived under his shelter, bound by his love. We never thought of remembering what he said. You live with your parents; you grow absorbing their love. You love them too. But if somebody asks, "How are your parents? What do they do? What do they say?" you will be fumbling. So also, we grew under his loving care, but I cannot reproduce any particular incident. And I didn't note down.' Once of course he did try to write down. But Sri Ramakrishna had said, 'Well, that is not your business.' Perhaps he meant that it was Master Mahashaya's business, not his.

Here's another incident. There was a pic-

ture of Sri Ramakrishna hanging on a wall in his room. Pointing towards that picture with his right hand and towards himself with his left, he would say: 'He had a number of dogs, and this fellow is his dog: I am his dog.' His very presence—whatever he did or said—was inspiring to all of us.

There are some other incidents that come to my mind. Every morning and evening he would go to the shrine at Belur Math. I mean the old shrine where Sri Ramakrishna was worshipped in those days; it was adjacent to his room. He would go with his *asana* tucked under his arm, and sit for hours at a stretch, lost in meditation. He would then come back to his room, perhaps take a little milk for breakfast, and go round the Math premises observing everything. He would inquire about the cows, the garden, and everything else, because it's all Sri Ramakrishna's property and they must be properly cared for. About the various activities going on at the Math, there were others to help him. They would consult him at every turn, he being senior and experienced.

Though he was older than Swamiji, Shivanandaji honoured Swamiji greatly and liked to serve him even. Swamiji allowed Mahapurush Maharaj to serve him when he fell ill during his last months. It was then that he asked Mahapurushji to go to Varanasi to start an Ashrama there. Swamiji, in the closing years of his life, had spent a month or two at Varanasi; during that period a gentleman had offered him 500 rupees. Only Rs.500, not 5,000 or 50,000, mind you. That gentleman had offered that sum for starting an Ashrama—a wonderful act! Now Swamiji told Shivanandaji to start the Ashrama with that money. But Shivanandaji protested: 'I would better be at Belur serving you.' Swamiji replied: 'Do you mean to say that I should become a thief by not using the money for the purpose it was intended? Should I cheat that gentleman?' Swamiji would talk like that. When he got furious he would scold using all kinds of words. So at last Mahapurushji had to yield.

He went to Varanasi and started the Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama the very day Swamiji passed away—4 July 1902. As the founder of the Ashrama, he lived a very austere life. Only 500 rupees were there with him. How long would the 500 rupees last? And there were no devotees in Varanasi to supply him with money. So, days passed in tremendous austerity, perhaps without sufficient food and clothing even. He managed somehow. There were two or three Brahmacharis who lived with him. Holy Mother and others would send novices to Varanasi to live under Shivanandaji's care because he was an austere sadhu and the novices would know what sadhu life meant.

One of these Brahmacharis had malaria once, and as a consequence, high fever—perhaps 106 degrees C. Once he soiled his clothes. Mahapurushji noticed it, brought a fresh cloth and gave it to him. He cleaned him too and said, 'Go and lie down.' The Brahmachari wanted to wash his soiled clothes but Mahapurushji said, 'No, no, don't bother about that. I shall do it.' The Brahmachari remonstrated, 'No, no, how can that be!' Mahapurushji said, 'Well, I shall see to that; you go.' And he did it himself!

At one time he served as manager of Belur Math. Malaria was rampant in those days. Once he found a Brahmachari lying on his bed without any food for a long time. He at once went to the kitchen, got some *sago* to feed him. Many thought that he was very stern, very stiff in his attitude, but in these instances we do not find him like that. We find him rather like a loving father. That is how I look upon him.

We read in his life that when he, Swamiji, and Swami Akhandananda went to Bodhi Gaya, they first sat on the Vajrasana where the Buddha had his realization. After that they entered the temple and sat before the Buddha in meditation. A light flashed from the Buddha and entered Shivanandaji's person. That is how the narration goes. But Swami Abhedanandaji puts it a little differently. He says,

'The light first touched me and then went into Mahapurush Maharaj.' After that, Swamiji got up from his meditation and embraced Mahapurush Maharaj with tears in his eyes. Somebody asked Swamiji later, 'Why did you cry and embrace Mahapurushji?' He said, 'Well, I felt that all things that were there during the Buddha's time are still here. But where is he? That pang of separation made me embrace him.' But we people think that he found something of the Buddha in Mahapurushji. Swami Abhedanandaji confirms the passing of the light; he said he saw it. And Mahapurush Maharaj also confirms it.

Shivanandaji performed austerities in Almora for some time. In reality the Almora Ashrama was started by him. Both Mahapurushji and Hari Maharaj lived there together. But Mahapurushji was called back to Varanasi for some work and the work at Almora, though started by Mahapurushji, was completed by Hari Maharaj. When Mahapurushji was there, Mr Sturdy was living somewhere near Almora and they had contacts. Mr Sturdy was a Theosophist. He was impressed by the austere life of Mahapurushji. It was through Mahapurushji that Sturdy was introduced to Swamiji. When Sturdy went back to England, he invited Swamiji to come to England and preach there.

Upon Swamiji's orders Mahapurushji once went to Colombo for preaching Vedanta. But he was there only for six months or so.

These are some of the incidents that come to my mind off-hand. Well, many books have come out in print, but not all of them have been translated. The memoirs of Mahapurushji have been written by his disciples and collected by Swami Apurvananda of Varanasi. He has produced 3/4 volumes, in Bengali though. [Note: They are now being translated into English by our Hollywood centre.] Only a little of it has been translated by Swami Vividishananda in *A Man of God*. His life also was written by Vividishananda himself.

Now, during those days—what we call the 'revolutionary' days—there were some

revolutionaries, called 'anarchists' by the British. A few came to Mahapurushji and talked with him about their plans and programmes and said that Swamiji's plans were not good as they would not bring freedom to India; their plans were better. Mahapurushji warned them, 'No, Swamiji has given you the right direction; and what Mahatmaji is doing is only the actualization of Swamiji's ideas.' He also said that 'not through the gun but in a peculiar way will India's freedom come.' And that is how it did come through Mahatma Gandhiji's efforts. Mahatmaji went to Belur Math once when Swamiji was alive. There was a conference in Calcutta and Mahatmaji had attended it. He wanted to meet Swamiji and came to Belur Math. But Swamiji had gone out. So he could not meet him. He came again in 1923. It was an unscheduled visit, and the people who had gathered there recognized him and said, 'Tell us something.' Then he said, 'I have not come here to make any speech, but rather to get inspiration from Swamiji. By reading his books, my love for India has increased thousandfold. And I ask the young men to take some inspiration from here where Swami Vivekananda lived.' All these he told from the upper verandah and the people were sitting below on the Ganges side. This is how Mahatmaji talked about Swamiji.

What were the ideas that Swamiji had preached? 'So long as the masses and the women are not uplifted, India cannot become greater. And then they have to be given food and education, science and technology. Give them education and then they will know what to do.' So these were the ideas that Shivanandaji put before the revolutionaries. 'Well, you follow Swamiji, and you can follow Mahatmaji also to the extent that he follows Swamiji, and things will be all right.' Of course they did not give ear to him. But that is another matter.

Shivanandaji had great love and respect for Mahatmaji. Swamis Turiyanandaji and Premanandaji were alive then. They too had

the same feeling. But the methods were different. Theirs was a spiritual approach: how India would be greater through spirituality, because spirituality is the backbone of India.

By the way, Mahapurushji was perhaps one of the first monks of the Sangha. He embraced the monastic life first and became the first monastic member of the Baranagore Math. When the Master passed away, Holy Mother went to Vrindaban. With her went a group of would-be monks. There was Latu Maharaj, Kali Maharaj, Yogin Maharaj and Mahapurushji. But then Swamiji was in search of a house where they could start the monastery, and he sent a note to Mahapurushji, 'You have no place to live in (he had already left home). So be ready. When I get a house, I shall send a wire and you must come there.' On getting this letter, he came down to Varanasi and waited for the wire. The wire read, 'Come'. He at once came and joined the Baranagore Math. So he was almost the first monk to join the monastery. Then in a few days came Swami Advaitananda. Later, others joined one by one.

It was supposed by us and the devotees that Mahapurushji had a touch of Shiva in him: not caring for anything and being sort of stern towards others—these are Shiva's qualities. These are Shivanandaji's *qualities*, not blemishes. He used to feed the jackals, looking upon them as the attendants of Mother Kali, the consort of Shiva. In those days, the monks themselves did not have enough to eat! But he would sit by the window and calling out to the jackals in the evening, throw *rotis* to them. In his old age also, he would ask his attendants to give *Shivābali*, ie, offerings to the Shivās, jackals—attendants of Mother Kali. Some eatables would be placed on the bank of the Ganges for the jackals. They knew that it would be there for them. They came in a group and took these offerings and howled. This pleased Mahapurushji. □

Scriptures and Sri Ramakrishna

SWAMI PITAMBARANANDA

Swami Pitambaranandaji Maharaj is the head of Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh. The Swamiji is well known for his scholarly lectures and writings. This excellent article on a vital subject is based on a talk he gave sometime back in Andhra Pradesh.

There is an incident concerning Swami Shivanandaji or Mahapurush Maharaj. Mahapurushji would generally sit with folded hands and head slightly bent, repeating Ramakrishna's name. One of his dear disciples from whom I heard this, asked him once: 'Maharaj, you are saying "Ramakrishna, Ramakrishna." What does this mean?' Mahapurushji became a little grave and said, 'Why, my boy? Why are you asking this question? Don't you know who Sri Ramakrishna is?' The disciple replied, 'Yes, I know that he was a man like us.' 'Why do you say so?' asked Mahapurushji in astonishment. 'When we read his life, we find that he too performed rigorous austerities. So he was a human being like us, because it is only a man who performs sadhana and attains perfection....' Mahapurushji became charged, as it were, and stood up. He said: 'My boy, tell me which sadhana reveals him as a human being? Take up any sadhana. Take up his Vedānta sadhana for instance: Tota Puri only instructed him about the Vedānta, and he entered into *nirvikalpa samādhi* almost immediately. Can a man or superman or even a saint achieve this? Consider his *vātsalya bhāva* sadhana. The Rāmāyat Panthi Babaji was worshipping Rāmlāla for long and was having wonderful experiences. Sri Ramakrishna not only knew about that Babaji's experiences at a glance, but also started having similar and deeper experiences. Finally, Rāmlāla stayed with him. Can any man or saint achieve this? You are only looking at the fact that he did sadhanas; but see through them and analyse them. Know that it was through his sadhanas that he clearly

revealed his divine nature—that he was God. Any of his sadhana will reveal that God incarnated on earth to show man what sadhana is: what ideal sadhana could be.'

Sri Ramakrishna made the scriptures worth their name, ie, he is like those who make scriptures living, *śāstrī kurvanti śāstrāṇi*. In the *Nārada Bhakti Sūtras* (69) there is a similar statement regarding the principal devotees (*mukhya bhaktas*): '*sat-śāstrī kurvanti śāstrāṇi*, makes the scriptures more sacred.' While instructing the 'secondary devotees' (*gauna bhaktas*) Nārada says (67), '*bhaktāḥ ekāntino mukhyāḥ*, those who have one-pointed devotion to God are real devotees.' Describing these devotees, he says: 'They impart holiness to holy places; they change ordinary works into spiritually elevating activities; they validate the scriptures.'

What are scriptures (*śāstras*)? Scriptures are those which can authoritatively guide us towards the ultimate goal. There are of course other functions of the scriptures: they inspire us, impress the spiritual truths on our minds, give us spiritual strength, etc. But their main purpose is to guide us along the path to the ultimate goal of life. The Vedas, specially Vedānta or the Upaniṣads, are the primary scriptures; then we have the Smṛtis and Purāṇas. Extending this definition, we can include the texts of all the world religions.

We have to understand what is meant by 'validating the scriptures.' Here is a scripture which tells us, out of the experiences of sages, authoritatively and unfailingly that if we follow certain steps we shall reach the goal. Nārada says, '*Bhavatu niścaya-dārdhyādūrd-*

hvaṁ śāstra-rakṣaṇam, When your conviction has become firm though you haven't yet realized God, you should take recourse to scriptures.' So *mukhya* bhaktas take recourse to scriptures. And as soon as they reach the goal, they validate the scriptures (*sat-śāstrī kurvanti śāstrāṇi*). The scriptures are real spiritual guides. This has been verified because numerous aspirants have been guided by them.

We are living in modern times and modern psychology tells us that by following the scriptures we are conditioning our minds. They say regarding visions: 'People have told you that Rama was like this, and you too are thinking that Rama is like this: so you are seeing Rama in this manner.' This is called conditioning of the mind. So the very fact of validating the scriptures is rejected by modern psychology.

Now there are two ways open to us. One is the Buddha way, because during ancient times also such doubts about scriptures were there. So the Buddha discarded scriptures and rediscovered the Truth himself. But there is a danger here: we fall victim to a negative thought process called heterodoxy. Thus we come to the second way, that of Ramakrishna.

Millions today accept *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* as the most authoritative scripture. To this we should also add *Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master (Līlā Prasāṅga)*. My teacher wrote to one of his disciples once: 'These days we are studying *The Great Master*—the scripture of scriptures, the greatest scripture.' That disciple himself was a great student of *Līlā Prasāṅga*; but owing to his analytical mind, he wrote back to his guru: 'To me *Līlā Prasāṅga* is greater than many of the Upaniṣads; but you are placing it on top of all the Upaniṣads, including the *Māṇḍūkya*, which speaks of Brahman in the most wonderful way?' To this the teacher replied: 'I'm not comparing it with any particular Upaniṣad. In all the Upaniṣads, Brahman has been revealed through the words of the ṛṣis. But here we find Brahman revealed in flesh and blood. Hence I am calling it the scripture of scriptures.' If we

understand the scriptures through the life of Sri Ramakrishna, we understand that the result of the Buddha's sadhana itself validates the Vedas, though the Buddha's followers may not think so.

Some people ask: While Sri Ramakrishna performed sadhanas of every known religion, why did he not practise the Buddha's teachings? Swami Saradananda has raised the question in *The Great Master*, and has quoted Ramakrishna himself in reply: 'There is no difference between the faith founded by him and the Vedic path of knowledge.' So we can understand through Sri Ramakrishna that the Buddha validated the Vedas by apparently rejecting them, doing sadhana independently, and reaching the same goal as declared in Vedānta.

Sri Ramakrishna has done much more. He did not *reject* the scriptures; but initially he did not resort to them but performed sadhana *without referring to* them. He thus got all the desired results, and then compared notes. He then took to different methodologies prescribed in all the known scriptures. This is something unique and unthought of. He has been called the prophet of harmony. In an essay titled 'Hinduism and Sri Ramakrishna,' Swami Vivekananda says:

The Divine, whose embodiment the Veda is, gave no facilities of literary education to this incarnation, in order to show how the eternally existing Sastra...reveals itself in the heart of a Rishi, wherefrom all Samskaras have been erased; so that, when the Truth of the Sastras is thus proved, religion would be re-discovered and re-promulgated' (*The Great Master*, 1978, p. 369).

Thus there was no chance of his mind being conditioned. Sometimes rejecting can itself become a conditioning—negative conditioning. But Sri Ramakrishna was practically an unlettered man in the sense that there was no conditioning in his mind. We have been taught that we must develop the right *samskāras* and then we can reach the goal. But modern psychologists will object to this again.

Hence Swami Vivekananda has said, '...in the heart of a Rishi wherefrom all Samskaras have been erased;...' That is, there are no impressions in the mind. Impressions start from individuality: 'I am a *jīva*'—this idea accumulates all the *samskāras*. The *ṛṣi*s travelled by the reverse path. As the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (2.1.1) says: '*Kāścid dhīraḥ pratyag-ātmānam aikṣad-āvṛttacakṣur-amṛtatvam icchan*, Desiring immortality, a rare discriminating man turns his eyes away and sees the indwelling Self.' They give up this I-ness totally. 'I' is the peg on which all the *samskāras* accumulate. When the 'I' is totally removed there are no *samskāras* left. What happens then? Truth shines in its original form. And therefore the Vedas have been called *apauruṣeya*, not man-made. The ultimate Truth—call it by whatever name you can, Brahman, Atman, or God—manifests itself in the consciousness of the *ṛṣi*. And that is why they say, '*tasya niḥśvasitam veda*, the Vedas have come out as God's breath.'

Swamiji explains in that article why Sri Ramakrishna did not take recourse to external education. By the dint of a single asset, aspiration (*vyākulatā*), he realized the ultimate Truth. That is exactly according to the Upaniṣads, though he was not aware of this. He spontaneously followed everything. The *Kaṭhupanīṣad* (1.2.23) tells us that no sadhana leads to God except *vyākulatā*, '*Yamevaiṣa vṛṇute tena labhyaḥ*, The Self is to be attained only by the one whom It chooses.' It is for increasing this yearning that we do all the sadhanas. Every sadhana is valid because ultimately it makes this yearning for God cent percent complete. Sri Ramakrishna himself tells us that when there is 100% *vyākulatā*, it is like the rosy dawn and the sunrise of realization must follow. It is a matter of time only.

In Part Five of *The Great Master*, we find Narendranath representing the ideal modern man who stumbles at many points and gets corrected by Sri Ramakrishna. We need two types of examples: what mistakes we can possibly make and how to come out of them is one model; what ideal sadhana is without any er-

ror is another model. The second type can be only an incarnation.

Some people wonder why it was necessary for Sri Ramakrishna to practise Islam and other faiths. The answer is, was it necessary for him to practise sadhana at all? He came to fulfill the cosmic need of the age. It was for establishing harmony of religions in this modern age that he took recourse to all the known methodologies. So though he began his sadhana without reference to scriptures and achieved the goal, yet he took recourse to scriptures later. There is also an opinion that the sadhana of bhakti does not lead to the Absolute. Sri Ramakrishna proved that it is not so. He said that pure bhakti and pure jnana are one and the same. As he said, 'Tying the Advaita knowledge to the hem of your cloth, do whatever you like.' Here 'do whatever you like' means to perform any sadhana we like.

The *R̥g Veda* declared long ago: '*Ekam sad-viprā bahudhā vadanti*, Truth is one, sages call It variously.' But we find incarnations of the past laying stress on some particular aspects of the supreme Truth according to the need of the age. But later, owing to our narrowness, the emphasis lead to one-sidedness. There was no confusion in the prophets' minds, but their stress on particular ideals lead to confusion in the followers' minds. Will this not happen in the case of Sri Ramakrishna too? No, because he emphasized harmony: that is the need of the present age. The world has come closer physically, but mentally it is drifting away. In spite of this, nobody can be an island now. I cannot sit in a corner and say that my sadhana alone is right and that I don't care for others. The second predicament of the modern period is, how do different scriptures speak differently, as if contradicting each other? How can all be true? We have seen above that Sri Ramakrishna followed all scriptural teachings, and each time he got the same end result. This proves that scriptures are not in conflict. Sri Ramakrishna had not only to validate each scripture separately but also to reconcile and harmonize them. That is why he

followed different paths and methodologies, and then told the world that the paths are different to suit different minds, but the goal is the same. We find him describing the evolution of the aspirant's consciousness according to *sapta-bhūmikās* (7 levels) of Vedānta. And then he compared notes with yoga, bhakti, etc.

The other need of the age is to bear the onslaught of modern science and also to harmonize its findings with the truths of religion. Modern science wants proof for everything. Sri Ramakrishna has provided ample proofs for everything. Swami Vivekananda calls Ramakrishna *avatāra-varīṣṭha*, the greatest of avatars; *sarva-dharma-svarūpa*, the embodiment of all religions; *dharmasya sthāpaka*, the establisher of dharma, etc.

Sri Ramakrishna couldn't use the word 'I' with reference to himself, and yet so much uniqueness was in that frail personality that he himself said:

Know that the many Harisabhas and other religious institutions you see are due to this (referring to his own person). Did they formerly exist? Everything had been lifeless, but since this (referring to his person again) came, all these have come to life again and a current of religion is now flowing just a little below the surface (*The Great Master*, p. 712).

Why did Sri Ramakrishna perform sadhana for 12 long years? Through his superhuman efforts he roused the cosmic spiritual power for the upliftment of humanity. If we, and the future generations, feel the need for God and zest for sadhana, we must understand and remember that it is Sri Ramakrishna who is inspiring us. God incarnate as man has the cosmic mind. When the vibration of sadhana is raised in that cosmic mind the minds of human beings for generations together become filled with such thoughts: 'I want to see God, I want to perform sadhana,' etc.

How could Ramakrishna achieve all this, even accepting that he was God incarnate, can be better understood through Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. She once told a disciple:

I tell you, my son, it never occurred to me that he practised all the religions with the express *motive* of preaching the idea of spiritual harmony. He was always in his mood of divine ecstasy. He practised all the methods through which the Christians, Mohammedans, Vaishnavas, and others worship God and realize truth, and thereby he tasted God's disports in diverse ways. ... But what you should note, my dear, is that *renunciation* is his special message in this age. Did anyone see such natural renunciation any time before? As for the harmony of religions you speak of, that also is true. In previous incarnations, all other spiritual moods looked insignificant because of the emphasis on a particular one (Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 1969, p. 463).

What did she mean? To wish that 'I want to see God in such and such a form' is also clinging to one's own 'I'. The ultimate renunciation makes one transcend even this desire. Sri Ramakrishna has described it through the beautiful analogy of a person who with some solution in his tub would dye with whatever colour his customers wanted. One man said to the dyer, 'Please give me the dye you have in your tub' (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 305). Here, the dyer is Sri Ramakrishna himself, that special customer is Swami Vivekananda, who wants God as He is. But there are people who want God in different ways. So he says, 'Here you are.' In the previous incarnations, the emphasis was on some aspect of God because of which the other aspects got suppressed. But this time the emphasis is on all aspects.

In conclusion, let me refer to the person again who had questioned Mahapurush Maharaj about Sri Ramakrishna. It so happened that the same person went to Swami Saradananda and asked him, 'Why are you writing this *Līlā Prasāṅga*?' Saradananda replied: 'In order that all the aspirants, belonging to all the denominations of the world could see light in their spiritual struggle.' □

RELIGION AND LIFE

Swami Bhuteshanandaji's Answers to Questions

The questions and answers being serialized in these columns are not meant to be scholarly expositions of various issues. People from different walks of life used to meet Swami Bhuteshanandaji Maharaj daily during his tenure as President of the Ramakrishna Order, and discuss with him their problems and doubts; and Revered Maharaj would clear their doubts in a characteristically simple way. These questions and answers were recorded and read out to him before he approved them all for publication.

Is it necessary to study the scriptures?

He who is not interested to learn the truths of the scriptures need not study them. But those who want to understand the truths that the scriptures teach and try to reflect them in their own lives must study them.

Maharaj, what is the real truth?

Is there something like 'real' or 'unreal' truth? That which is absolute can never be relative. So truth is truth and has no 'real' or 'unreal' in it.

Maharaj, what is the ego?

Ego is that form of mind which feels, 'I am the doer' and 'I am the enjoyer.' When there is no one to act, nothing to be acted upon, and no effect is seen, then there is no action at all. But when we regard the intellect as a faculty, mind as another faculty, etc, then we give different names to the special modifications (*vṛttis*) of the inner organ (*antahkaraṇa*). When the mind becomes pure we have pure *vṛttis* rising in it. When the *antahkaraṇa* becomes pure, it becomes transparent. Then there remains nothing to distort it.

What is pure antahkaraṇa?

By pure *antahkaraṇa* both pure mind and pure intellect (*buddhi*) are meant. When the intellect becomes pure, it is pure Self. Just as the sun is hidden by clouds, the mind envelops the Self and hides it. As the mind becomes pure, it becomes transparent. As it be-

comes transparent, the real nature of the Self or God becomes progressively clear to it. When the mind becomes completely pure in this manner, there will remain no impediment and the Self stands revealed.

What is the pure Self?

It means that the Self has no super-impositions. The body has birth and death; but we think that the Self also has birth and death. This is superimposition. When something is superimposed on something else, it is clear that the superimposed is unreal and so the thing-in-itself is 'impure'. When superimposition goes, the thing-in-itself is revealed as it is.

Maharaj, how to make our mind pure?

The mind is said to be pure when only pure thoughts arise in it. Do not entertain or give room to unholy thoughts in the mind, and thus the mind can become pure. It will not do merely to sit and weep that the mind is impure or restless: one must be up and doing.

Why is the Self regarded as unattached (nirlipta)?

Non-attachment implies that the Atman is indifferent. In other words, the Self is absolutely untouched or unaffected by our feelings of happiness and misery, pain and pleasure.

Where is this Self?

The gross body (*sthūla śarīra*), the subtle body (*sūkṣma śarīra*), and the causal body

(*kāraṇa śarīra*)—behind these three is the Self or Atman. Everything else is illumined by the light of the Self. The causal body (*kāraṇa śarīra*) is also called the seed body (*bīja śarīra*); it is from this that the subtle and gross bodies are formed.

What is the difference between all these bodies and the Self?

We see that when someone dies, he is either cremated or interred. When this is done, the body that we used to see disintegrates and merges with the five elements, called *pañca-bhūtas*. Earth, water, fire, air and space—these are the five elements. When thus the gross physical body disintegrates, we cannot see anything else. There is the subtle body which we cannot see. This subtle body will merge into the causal body. The causal body, as I said, is the seed body (*bīja śarīra*). Thus the causal body remains in seed form.

It is like this: In the state of deep sleep, we do not function. We have no awareness but that there is bliss. This deep sleep (*susupti*) is called the causal-state. Behind this causal body is the Self; it is beyond the causal state. Thus the Self or Atman is neither gross, nor subtle, nor causal; it is beyond everything. When we, who have the awareness of 'I', transcend the limitations of the gross, subtle and causal, then we attain to the state of the pure Self. If we have to transcend the body-consciousness or the feeling of identity with the body, we shall have to practise spiritual disciplines sincerely and progress steadily.

How can the feeling I-ness in saṁsāris (householders) go?

What is I-ness? It is associating the feeling of existence with the body. It is being tied down to the gross body. *Aham* means giving importance to this 'I'. When I-ness goes, that which had bound me, that which had made me small, will drop down. Now, who is a

saṁsāri? Just by marrying alone one will not become a *saṁsāri*. That which is transient and changing is called *saṁsāra*. One who considers the transient body to be 'I' is a *saṁsāri*. And if there is the body there is birth and death.

How can we be liberated?

Our scriptures repeat times without number that once the feeling of I-ness goes there is liberation. He who considers himself to be bound is bound. He who considers himself to be free is free.

Are liberation for one and bondage for another too predestined?

What do you think about this? If you really wanted liberation, you would become restless like fish out of water.

Can sacrifice, yājña, etc bring liberation?

He who has a thousand rupees in his pocket will not become mad after a rupee, will he? He will tap his pocket and say, 'I have a lot of money.' He who wants liberation will not perform sacrifices.

So are sacrifices only meant for fulfilment of desires?

Mostly so. Having acquired this life, spending it well or ill is in our hands. We shall have therefore to struggle. King Parikshit (of *Bhāgavata*) was destined to die in seven days. What did he do those seven days? He went out of the city and spent his time in repeating God's names. He never felt, 'Since there are only seven more days left, let me enjoy life.' He had good past impressions (*saṁskāras*) in him and so he tried to spend his last days fruitfully. The *Bhagavadgītā* says that of the thousands of people, one or two strive for God. This was so in ancient times, and will be the same even today.

Coventry, its Cathedral, and Christmas

DR ALAN HUNTER

Dr Alan Hunter is a specialist in both Chinese Studies and Religious Studies. He has worked in Shanghai, Hong Kong, etc, and has several books to his credit. In this wonderful article, Dr Hunter brings us a story of the evils of war, and conveys the Christmas message that love and forgiveness alone triumph in the end. Hatred can never lead to lasting good.

Coventry Cathedral ranks among the outstanding achievements of religious architecture in Britain in the 20th century. It's a concrete embodiment of genuine Christian sentiment that surfaced during a great tragedy. It may also provoke some thoughts, probably rather pessimistic ones, about even greater tragedies. Coventry had a long religious history with many beautiful old buildings, especially clustered around the great church of St Michael, which in 1918 was granted Cathedral status.

Coventry is an industrial city in the Midlands; the geographical centre of England, by most calculations, lies only a few miles to the west. The town bloomed in the 1920s and 1930s mostly due to the numerous factories producing vehicles, electrical goods, textiles, engines and a wide range of other items. The factories became even busier at the start of the Second World War, as many were converted to the production of armaments.

By October 1940, the German air force dominated the night skies over England. In November, the German air force stepped up its raids on Coventry and neighbouring Birmingham. On November 14th they launched what was probably the largest air attack of the early war years. Some 400 bombers were ac-

tive from 6 pm until about 5 am, dropping 500 tons of explosives. The city was virtually defenceless; it is thought that at the most two German planes were lost. Many thousands of civilians had already vacated the city, some of them camping out in the surrounding countryside; most of the remainder spent the night in underground shelters. This evasive action accounts for the relatively low casualties: an



Sculpture of 'Reconciliation' installed in 1995. An identical sculpture was installed in the Garden of Peace, Hiroshima

estimated 550 dead and 1,000 injured. The city, however, was effectively devastated. Almost all factories and a great proportion of the housing stock, some 46,000 homes, were damaged: much of it had to be demolished. Essential commodities were unus-

able. The food supply was uncertain for a while. The city centre was mostly rubble.

As a symbol for the destruction, even the cathedral had burned almost to the ground, attempts to save it having failed through lack of water, with all supplies cut off due to bomb damage. One tower still stood, and a few of the treasures had been safely stored underground. On the morning after the raid, a caretaker took two partly burnt beams from the fallen roof, tied them in the shape of a cross, and set it in a mound of rubble.

Repair work commenced, and some factories restarted production after a few weeks;

but Coventry has not yet recovered from the raid. Most old English towns have some kind of historic centre, but central Coventry dates only from the 1950s—a visible reminder of the destructiveness of war. Yet the Provost of the Cathedral, R.T. Howard, was a remarkable personality who managed to create something positive out of this gloomy story. In 1940 the BBC invited Provost Howard to lead one of its Christmas broadcasts from the ruins of the cathedral. During his speech he said: 'Early this Christmas morning, here under these ruins, in the lovely little stone chapel built 600 years ago, we began the day with our Christmas communion, worshipping the Christ, believe me, as joyfully as ever before. What we want to tell the world is this: that with Christ born again in our hearts today, we are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge...we are going to try to make a kinder, simpler, a more Christ-Child-like sort of world in the days beyond this strife.'¹

Strangely enough, the idea of eventual reconciliation was adopted by a few other citizens. For example, a small group, almost all of whom had lost property and loved ones in the bombing, decided in 1940 to start a study circle to learn German, so that immediately the conflict ended they could communicate with their ex-enemies. Their work came to fruition in 1946 when they formed England's first post-war German friendship society.

Another example was one Gwilym Williams, a building specialist, who worked for the Allied Control Commission in Germany in

1946. Mr Williams came from Coventry, yet he threw himself into the task of rebuilding one of Germany's cities, Kiel, that had been shattered by British bombing. His dedication to the task so moved his German counterparts that the Mayor of Kiel stated in an interview: 'This man, whose home-town the German Air Force had senselessly destroyed, felt no satisfaction in seeing that the Royal Air Force had repaid in the same coin. This man had immediately done everything in his power to help a town which had shared the fate of his native city. ... Mr Williams had not, like great sections of humanity, taken years to surmount the walls of hatred which the war had raised in all nations. For him the obligations of humanity were above any narrow-minded, short-sighted nationalism. He had come to help us repair our homes.'²



The ruins of Coventry Cathedral, leading to the new cathedral

Meanwhile the Provost continued his work for reconciliation. He was invited to broadcast on the BBC for Christmas 1946, this time in a joint programme with a Roman Catholic church in Germany. 'You know what happened to us here in Coventry, and you can easily picture what it was like. We know what happened to you in Hamburg, and can partly imagine it. ... I think I see between us at our feet, the Christ Child lying in His crib. Across the Child I stretch out my hand and put it into yours, my brother. ... Looking down into the face of the infant Jesus—God in human flesh—two words spring to my lips to say to you. The first word is "Forgiveness". ...the second word is this: "New Birth". We have 20,000 new homes to build...but more important still, there is a new spirit to be born—new courage, new faith, new unselfishness, new pity for each

1. Provost Richard Howard, BBC broadcast, Christmas Day, 1940. Much of the information in this part of the article comes from W.E. Rose, *Sent from Coventry: A Mission of International Reconciliation* (London: Wolff, 1980).

2. Oberbürgermeister Andreas Gayk, quoted in *Kieler Presse*, January 1947.

other's sufferings, new family love and purity.' A response came from Pastor Mecklenburg, Roman Catholic Pastor in Hamburg: 'Your message of forgiveness and new birth awakens an echo in my heart. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us." If only those words could be echoed in all our hearts! If only we could cast out bitterness and hatred and begin again, then I believe that our children—yours and ours—may live together in peace and brotherhood.' Provost Howard was determined that forgiveness, reconciliation, and international friendship were to be the key elements of Christian work in post-war Coventry. A litany was composed which is still recited every Friday at noon in the ruins of the old cathedral:

*The hatred which divides nation from nation,
 race from race, class from class, Father, forgive;
 The covetous desires of men and nations to possess
 what is not their own, Father, forgive;
 The greed which exploits the labours of men
 and lays waste the earth, Father, forgive;
 Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,
 Father, forgive;
 Our indifference to the plight of the homeless
 and the refugee, Father, forgive;
 The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves
 and not in God, Father, forgive.*

There were some who interpreted the words 'Father, forgive' as 'Father, forgive those wicked Germans, because I will not.' The Provost categorically rejected this view and stated that 'There are no innocents; we all stand in need of forgiveness...'

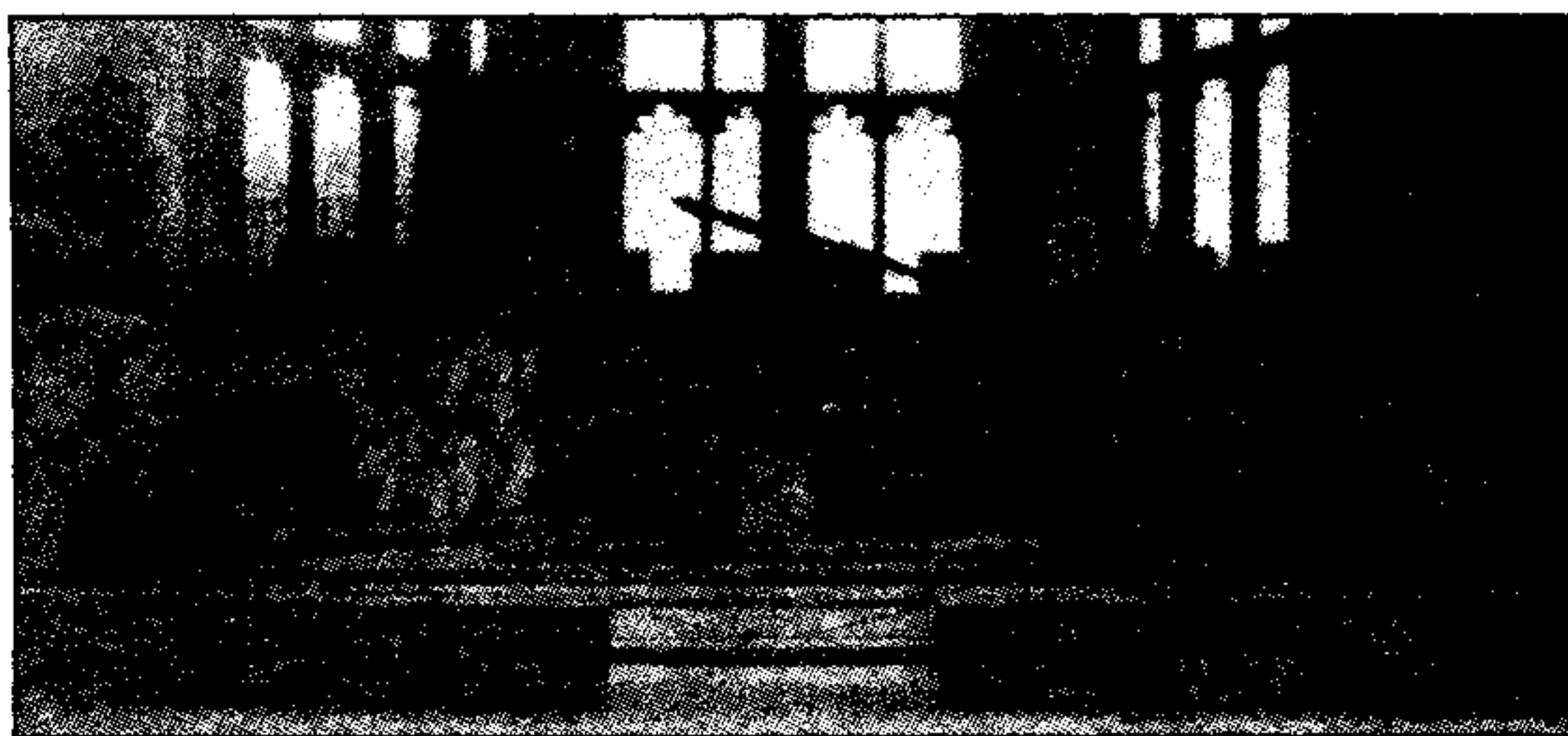
Despite some ups and downs, the cathedral and city have attempted to fulfill this vision, setting up links with counterparts like Kiel, Dresden, Stalingrad, and Lidice. These links were extended to development and

peace projects in Greece, Israel, Ireland, and even India. The Director of urban studies in Coventry Cathedral in 1970 was a Methodist minister, Kenyon Wright, who had earlier worked for 15 years in West Bengal. Deeply concerned by the fate of the city during the refugee crisis of 1971, Reverend Wright was a founder member of the Europa-Calcutta Consortium, comprising relief agencies in Britain, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands, whose purpose was to provide financial support to the 'Kalikata Bustee Pragati Samstha' and other projects.

An important post-war decision concerned the fate of the cathedral itself. It was decided in 1950 to hold an open competition for architects to submit designs for a new cathedral.

The terms of the competition stated: 'The cathedral is to speak to us and to generations to come of the majesty, the eternity, and the glory of God.' The winner, announced in August 1951, was a young architect, Basil Spence, who incidentally was born in India. Spence wrote that the first formative architectural experience of his life was a visit to the Elephanta caves.³

Spencer's brilliant design had two key aspects. First, he decided to leave intact the ruins of the old cathedral. Parts of the walls, stonework, and paving stones remain, and the area is used for quiet reflection or, occasionally, open air services and performances. At one end is a simple altar, a cross made of charred wood, and the words 'Father Forgive.' Second, the new cathedral stands at right angles to the old, and it represented a new departure in religious architecture in England. Spence decided not to mimic traditional styles,



The altar of the old cathedral, with the words 'Father Forgive'

3. Basil Spence, *Phoenix at Coventry: The Building of a Cathedral* (London: Bles, 1962), p. 7.



Monument of Lady Godiva with St Michael's Cathedral to the left, Coventry

but to use contemporary design and building methods. He also persuaded many outstanding artists to provide examples of their work. Sculpture, stained glass, wood carvings, tapestry, floor-tiles, lettering, all represent fine elements of mid-century art. Perhaps the best known is a masterpiece of stained glass, possibly the largest window in England, by John Piper. The design is abstract, making use of colours to depict the light of truth breaking through the shadows of the world. Among the messages of the cathedral was the general principle of new birth after destruction, which is the symbolic meaning of the Phoenix, Coventry's emblem. In more specific Christian terms, the new cathedral represented the power of resurrection after the crucifixion of the city.

Incidentally, the design of the new cathedral was by no means universally welcomed; in fact it provoked a storm of outrage, especially from traditionalists who called it, among other things, 'a horror,' 'a super-cinema,' 'an aesthetic outrage,' etc! Eventually it opened in May 1962, and attracted two and a half million visitors in its first year. It is now widely recognized as a masterpiece of modern architecture.

Coventry University recently decided to further the city's international work by opening a new Centre for the Study of Forgiveness and Reconciliation, where the writer of this article currently works. The University Centre is entirely independent of the Cathedral and has no religious agenda. It may seem strange

at first sight that a university would want to promote study of forgiveness and reconciliation, which to most people sound like 'churchy' concepts: ideal, perhaps, but not very practical or scientific. But in the 1990s, the world was shaken by a series of conflicts that implied perhaps greater brutalization and degradation than even the 1940s. When I read an account of the Coventry bombing, I was impressed by a simple story. One worker in the city agreed to follow the normal precautions and hide in a shelter during the raids; but he refused to wear a gas mask. When his son asked him why, he replied that he could understand people bombing enemy factories; but if humanity had descended to a level where people would drop gas on other human beings, he did not care to carry on living.

I suppose that gentleman would have found it hard to live through the 1990s. Up to the 1930s, war had most commonly been an effort organized by one state to defeat the armed forces of a rival state. It rapidly became clear in the 1990s that something new and sinister was developing. Across large parts of Africa, South America, Central Asia, and Southeast Europe, new kinds of paramilitary groups emerged. Sometimes they were fragments of security services from disintegrating states; sometimes militias with fundamentalist religious objectives; sometimes followers of local warlords. More often than not they were deeply embroiled in disputes over drugs, territory, and arms shipments. Other disturbing features became apparent. Huge numbers of children are learning to carry arms: one estimate is that several hundred thousand children are now fighting in over twenty-five armed conflicts. Reports indicate that many of the children are turned into drug addicts, and most of them have no idea who they are fighting for, or why.

In at least some of the great military conflicts of earlier years, armed forces generally adopted some kind of 'rules of engagement,' even if they were frequently flouted. There was some sense that prisoners should not be

executed, that women and children were not booty, that Red Cross and ambulance services were not combatants, that peace agreements would be respected. In the 1990s, a new term became current: ethnic cleansing. An older one, genocide, had to be resurrected. Potentially rich countries like Angola have become wastelands: over half a million people died in a civil war that brought no victors, only suffering. Kabul, a once-thriving and colourful city, has become, in the words of one observer in 1998, 'mile upon mile of rubble and dust, abandoned and windswept, populated here and there by ragged families eking out their survival inside abandoned truck containers that have been sawn in half. Ranging up the hillsides were thousands of roofless and windowless houses, deserted by their former inhabitants. The warring militias had spared nothing: the blue-domed mosques, the minarets, the hospitals, the schools. The Kabul museum, which once housed collections of early Buddhist relics, lay open to the sky, its ancient columns lying about on the roadside, its collections looted. Artillery detachments were scuttling about in the ruins.'⁴

There seems to be no room for peace in many of these conflicts, let alone forgiveness and reconciliation. Perhaps between two nations, a peace accord can be signed and may become more or less permanent. But the case is different when one is talking about paramilitaries allegedly 'protecting' two communities who live alongside each other. It has proved so easy for neighbouring ethnic groups to get caught in downward spirals of mutual hatred, fear, stereotyping, hysteria, conflict, and ultimately, unrestrained violence. A peace accord in these situations most often means merely a pause in the fighting, a chance for regrouping and an adjustment of strategy.

So where is the Christmas message for

2000? Do forgiveness and reconciliation mean anything to millions of victims, their families, their communities? Would Provost Howard still worship his Christ 'as joyfully as ever before'? Perhaps a few bright flashes still encourage us. The world has been heartened to some extent by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, and by the peace process in Northern Ireland. But the rebuilding of human values in devastated societies is going to take decades at least.

There is a growing recognition, even in mainstream politics, that much of the 'new' ethnic violence we have been discussing, is not easily subject to conventional monitoring like arms control. If people hate each other with sufficient force, they will manage to kill each other even if they have to use machetes. War has its technical aspects. But even more fundamentally it has its roots deep in the divided and troubled human consciousness. New 'peace agreements' to be meaningful really have to indicate: 'We will no longer regard these persons as our enemies.' For communities who have suffered unbearable heartache these words are perhaps, understandably, almost impossible to utter.

According to Swami Vivekananda, India has a role to play in the world: it stands for the spiritualization of human consciousness. In the face of so much hopelessness, one can only hope that its mission *will* be fulfilled. Indian religious teachings are much more widely known in the West now than they were in 1940, so perhaps that is a positive development of the past sixty years. In England, for example, most cities now have organizations teaching Buddhism, Hinduism, meditation and different kinds of yoga. Vegetarianism is very widespread. The influence of Gandhi is strong in peaceful protests against environmental destruction. Perhaps too slowly, the soft dew of spiritual life may permeate our troubled societies. That would be a real Christmas message. □

4. M. Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honour: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1998), p. 141.

Leadership and Ethics

DR DEBAPRASAD BHATTACHARYA

A professor of chemical engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, Dr Bhattacharya makes a fervent appeal to follow ethical ideals for everyone's good.

Ethical or moral behaviour relates an individual favourably to society and to other individuals. Ethical values are cherished by all societies. In India ethics is reflected even in political life by its inclusion in the Constitution (Article 51A). It is essentially an exhortation on basic human values and an expression of the need for value orientation in our educational system beginning from the school stage. If, however, we gloss over life in independent India, we cannot miss the steady decline of these values. Even in the esteem of the highest executive of the country the situation has reached such an alarming proportion that the government has instituted a committee to 'operationalize the suggestions to teach the fundamental duties to the citizens of the country.' This committee has recommended, among other things, the need to include ethical teachings of all religions, value-based lessons and studies on moral values.

In India, the land of religion, at all ages it was the sages who commanded the respect of the people in general. It is here that people 'take pride in being the descendants of Rishis and sages who lived on roots and fruits in mountains and caves, meditating on the Supreme,' says Swami Vivekananda.¹

How do we define moral behaviour? According to Swami Vivekananda, 'The only definition that can be given of morality is this: That which is selfish is immoral and that which is unselfish is moral.'²

Ethics always says, 'Not I, but thou.' Its motto is, 'Not self, but non-self.' The vain ideas of individualism to which man clings when he is trying to find that infinite power or that infinite pleasure through the senses, have to be given up—say the laws of ethics. You have to put *yourself* last, and others before you. The senses say, 'Myself first.' Ethics says, 'I must hold myself last.'³

Swamiji said: 'Selfishness is the chief sin, thinking of ourselves first.'⁴ He identifies selfishness as the chief sin probably because selfishness is at the background of all activities not strictly ethical or moral. Selfish people, comprising the vast majority of any society, do not have control over their mind. Swamiji says:

Free! We who cannot for a moment govern our own minds, nay, cannot hold our minds on a subject, focus it on a point to the exclusion of everything else for a moment! Yet we call ourselves free. Think of it! We cannot do as we know we ought to do even for a very short space of time. Some sense-desire will crop up, and immediately we obey it. Our conscience smites us for such weakness, but again and again we do it, we are always doing it.⁵

Sri Ramakrishna initiated activities for the alleviation of human misery and appointed his beloved disciple Swami Vivekananda as the leader to carry out his work. Swami Vivekananda formally founded the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission—the former principally for the spread of spirituality, and the latter for philan-

1. Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), Vol. 3, p. 139. [Hereafter, *Complete Works*.]

2. *Complete Works*, Vol. 1, p. 110.

3. *Complete Works*, Vol. 2, pp. 62-3.

4. *Complete Works*, Vol. 3, p. 143.

5. *Complete Works*, Vol. 6, p. 30.

thropic activities as the worship of God Himself. This has been achieved because Swamiji left behind a legacy of leadership which has not deviated an inch from the strict codes of ethics followed in running their activities.

Work, work. Be the servant while leading. ... Do not try to 'boss' others ... I want that there should be no hypocrisy, no Jesuitism, no roguery. ... No shilly-shally, no *esoteric blackguardism*, no secret humbug, nothing should be done in a corner. No special favouritism of the Master, no Master at that, even. Onward, my brave boys—money or no money—men or no men! Have you love? Have you God? ... Take care! Beware of everything that is untrue; stick to truth and we shall succeed, maybe slowly, but surely. Work as if on each of you depended the whole work.⁶ If you project hatred and jealousy, they will rebound on you with compound interest. No power can avert them; when once you have put them in motion, you will have to bear them. Remembering this will prevent you from doing wicked things.⁷

The road to the Good is the roughest and steepest in the universe. It is a wonder that so many succeed, no wonder that so many fall. Character has to be established through a thousand stumbles.⁸

All these are a few examples of his innumerable exhortations to his brother-disciples and disciples.

A very significant piece of advice of Sri Ramakrishna, to make our mind and speech the same, has been echoed by Swamiji also. He says, 'Where did you ever hear of money making man? If you can make your thoughts and words perfectly at one, if you can, I say, make yourself one in speech and action, money will pour in at your feet of itself, like water.'⁹

If we look around, we will find that those who are 'one in thought and speech' are found wanting. During the pre-independence era,

many of India's heroes, drawing inspiration from Swami Vivekananda's works, thought nothing of sacrificing their lives for the ideal. In a little over fifty years since independence, the thinking public of India is faced with a situation where a near total degeneration has crept into the term 'social service,' particularly when organized by societies or associations patronized or headed by public figures. Common people contribute to these institutions but in most cases, it is not out of any conviction of purpose but in order to be at peace with the leaders. One can cite the example of numerous extravagant community *pujas* and festivals, organized in almost all cities, where money is extorted forcibly by social outfits, ostensibly for various philanthropic purposes. It is only common knowledge that in almost all cases persons involved have political connections and are in league with the law-enforcing agencies, and the law is generally allowed to 'take its own course.'

If we ponder over this degeneration of ethical conduct, we are sure to point towards the distortion of the ideal of secularism as practised in the country, which is neglect of religion (*dharma upēksā*) rather than neutrality towards conflicting dictates of various faiths (*mata nirapekṣatā*), an idea Swami Ranganathanandaji, the President of the Ramakrishna Order, has been explaining very lucidly in many of his talks. The root of ethics can only be found in dharma, religion in the true sense, irrespective of its denomination. To quote Swami Vivekananda:

In India it has been preached, 'love all beings as yourselves'; we make no distinction between men and animals. But no reason was forthcoming, no one knew why it would be good to love other beings as ourselves. And the reason, why, is there in the idea of the Impersonal God; you understand it when you learn that the whole world is one—the oneness of the universe—the solidarity of all life—that in hurting any one I am hurting myself, in loving any one I am loving myself. Hence we understand why it is that we ought not to hurt others. The reason for

6. *Complete Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 369-70.

7. *Complete Works*, Vol. 1, p. 262.

8. *Complete Works*, Vol. 8, p. 383.

9. *Complete Works*, Vol. 6, p. 455.

ethics, therefore, can only be had from this ideal of the Impersonal God.¹⁰

Utilitarian standards cannot explain the ethical relations of men, for, in the first place, we cannot derive any ethical laws from considerations of utility. ... The Utilitarian wants us to give up the struggle after the Infinite, the reaching-out for the Super-sensuous, as impracticable and absurd, and, in the same breath, asks us to take up ethics and do good to society. ... Doing good is a secondary consideration. We must have an idea. Ethics itself is not the end, but the means to the end. If the end is not there, why should we be ethical? ... In the second place, the basis of utility is too narrow. All the current social forms and methods are derived from society as it exists, but what right has the Utilitarian to assume that society is eternal? Society did not exist ages ago, possibly will not exist ages hence. ... At best, therefore, utilitarian theories can only work under present social conditions. ... But a morality, an ethical code, derived from religion and spirituality, has the whole of infinite man for its scope.¹¹

A child grows up with an ideal before him. He is quick to pick up the difference between the preaching and practice, and is prone to follow the guardian's ways rather than words. Only good advice does not help: the advice should also be practised. Who can dispute the fact that it is from today's children that tomorrow's leaders are made? Therefore it is imperative on everyone of us to always practise what we preach. We have since long been hearing about the 'rich national heritage,' but in the name of practising secularism we have forgotten the foundation of that heritage which is spirituality. We have ignored Swamiji's warning:

But mark you, if you give up that spirituality, leaving it aside to go after the materialising civilisation of the West, the result will be that in

three generations you will be an extinct race; because the backbone of the nation will be broken, the foundation upon which the national edifice has been built will be undermined, and the result will be annihilation all round.¹²

It is time we heeded to his advice that '...denunciation is not at all the way to do good. That there are evils in our society even a child can see; and in what society are there no evils? And let me take this opportunity, my countrymen, of telling you that in comparing the different races and nations of the world I have been among, I have come to the conclusion that our people are on the whole the most moral and the most godly, and our institutions are, in their plan and purpose, best suited to make mankind happy. I do not, therefore, want any reformation. My ideal is growth, expansion, development on national lines.'¹³

As I told you before, in the first place, we must try to keep our historically acquired character as a people. I grant that we have to take a great many things from other nations, that we have to learn many lessons from outside; but I am sorry to say that most of our modern reform movements have been inconsiderate imitations of Western means and methods of work; and that surely will not do for India.¹⁴

There is no use to despair of having no positive fruits, but we should always remember this:

*Truth does not pay homage to any society, ancient or modern. Society has to pay homage to Truth or die. Societies should be moulded upon truth, and truth has not to adjust itself to society. ... That society is the greatest, where the highest truths become practical.*¹⁵

While we fervently hope that the nation will try to raise itself to a high standard of human behaviour, the real responsibility rests with each citizen to raise our moral and ethical standards as also that of our families. □

10. *Complete Works*, Vol. 3, pp. 129-30.

11. *Complete Works*, Vol. 2, pp. 63-4.

12. *Complete Works*, Vol. 3, p. 153.

13. *Complete Works*, Vol. 3, p. 195.

14. *Complete Works*, Vol. 3, p. 195.

15. *Complete Works*, Vol. 2, pp. 84-5.

The Song of the Saint

'Mere to giridhar gopal, dūsaro na koi,
Lord Kṛṣṇa alone is mine and none else.'

A mendicant had come to my house one day. He had a beautiful Kṛṣṇa image with him. I, a little girl then, wanted it. But the mendicant wouldn't part with it. I felt so bad and wept bitterly. But the day he was to take leave of us, the mendicant handed over his beloved Kṛṣṇa to me and said, 'My dear girl, take care of him.' That was the most blessed moment in my life. I played with my Kṛṣṇa, talked to him, cajoled him, decorated him...

'Jāke sir mor mukut, mero pati soi, the one with a peacock feather on his crown alone is my husband.'

'Meera, O Meera!' That was my mother calling. 'Won't you see something wonderful going on in the street?' I wasn't that keen because I hadn't still finished decorating my Kṛṣṇa, but went. It was a procession. 'What's it, mother?' I asked. My mother replied, 'See...see there! That's the girl getting married, and that's her husband...' 'Mother, I too am a girl. Where's my husband then?' I asked. My mother replied instantly, 'Krishna is your husband.' I ran to my Kṛṣṇa. 'So you are my husband and never told me that at all! You are so cruel.' My Kṛṣṇa was in the same posture—smiling and playing the flute. That was when I didn't understand what 'husband' meant.

When I was 13, my father Rāṇā Ratna Singh arranged for a big festival; and I was the centre of all attention. Strange people came. They were all kings, I was told. Something took place. And they said I was getting married. 'But, mother, I'm already married! Kṛṣṇa is my husband and you know that!' 'Shh! Stupid girl! Do you know whose wife you are going to become? It's the great Bhojarāja, the

son of Rāṇā Sāṅga of Chitore.' 'But I'm already married to Kṛṣṇa!' My mother had scolded me severely that day. I had run to my Kṛṣṇa and wept bitterly: 'You're unfortunately silent always. They are arranging for my marriage and you can't say I'm married.' Kṛṣṇa, as usual, played his flute and smiled.

The celebration was over. Heaps of glittering ornaments were poured on me. But it was my mother's change of behaviour that caused wonderment to me. She who had told me that my husband was Kṛṣṇa was herself so busy now! Then came the time of my departure to my husband's place. I wouldn't go, but they said I have to. The entire palace wept. My parents shed profuse tears. But I was left wondering: Who asked them to arrange for my marriage? Why were they weeping now? They wouldn't allow me to take my Kṛṣṇa with me. I said rather firmly, 'Krishna will go with me, or I shall not go.' My parents-in-law laughed aloud and said, 'Very good. We are Vaiṣṇavas. We shall be so glad to have Kṛṣṇa's image. Come with it.'

'Tāta māta bhrāta bandhu apano na koi,
I have no father, mother, brother, or friends...'

Strange place, strange people, strange systems and customs. I was no more the same free bird. I was constantly attended to. I was, as they said, the *bahu*, daughter-in-law. But all this irritated me. I wanted only to speak to my Kṛṣṇa and nothing else. But who could understand me? So I became more and more aloof, living with my Kṛṣṇa. My estrangement led to uneasiness in my husband's home. They were unhappy with my behaviour. They disliked my mixing freely with fakirs and devotees, my singing and dancing in public—I being the princess of Chitore. My husband initially ignored but slowly became averse to my ways.

I began to receive blows. The first was the passing away of my parents-in-law. They were a great support to me, but they were gone. Then came the bitter news that Babur had attacked my father's kingdom; my father was wounded in war and succumbed to it. My mother followed him soon. Now I had no one in the world: no father, no mother, no brothers or sisters. I had only Kṛṣṇa. The greatest blow was widowhood: my husband took ill of some strange disease and was gone. I served him to the best of my ability, but couldn't save him. Was my Kṛṣṇa so bad? I wept and wept but all I saw was Kṛṣṇa playing the flute.

'Asuvan jal sīnch sīnch prem bij boyi, I sowed the seed of love for Kṛṣṇa and watered it with my tears.'

Widowhood showed me the truth of this world: there's nothing here. Everything is fleeting. My Kṛṣṇa alone is real. I became more and more indrawn. I despised the palace. What was palace to my little soul? What were riches? When people forced me to lead a 'normal' life, my only answer was tears. I shed tears profusely and prayed to my Kṛṣṇa. He alone would listen to me. A deep bond of love had developed between my Kṛṣṇa and myself, which no one could understand. I didn't know if it was morning or evening, night or day. All my thoughts were on Kṛṣṇa and how to please him. I became a mendicant of the Lord myself and poured out my heart to him. No one can understand the joy I experienced out of this love.

'Chād dayī kul ki kān kyā karega koi, I threw the honour of my family to the winds; who can do anything to me?'

The new Rāṇā, Vikramāditya, my husband's brother, was a wicked man, and history is replete with his evil deeds. He cared little for finer sentiments. Being a widow, I was supposed to lead a hidden life, whereas I was out in the public, in the Kṛṣṇa temple, singing and dancing in joy. It created such unrest in the family that I was victimized on several occasions. How many insults had I to face! Twice the king tried to kill me. But for one who is a

slave of Kṛṣṇa, who can do anything? Poison turns into nectar, snake turns into garland.

I realized that it was time I went on a pilgrimage. Where else would I go than to my dear Brindavan, my Lord's field of sport? I went with a few of my friends. It was a period of great joy in my life. My Kṛṣṇa was always with me, as if showing me every one of his sports again. When I wished to meet the great devotees of Brindavan and sought to have Śrī Jīva Goswāmī's darshan, he sent word that he wouldn't meet a woman. I smiled and sent a reply: 'Venerable sir, till now I had thought that Kṛṣṇa is the only Puruṣa and all the rest are Prakṛti ...' He understood; and we talked for a long time on the *līlā* of the Lord.

At Brindavan I was in heaven. Palace was a prison to me; but there, I was a bird, flying in the bliss of divine love. No one can understand my feelings. It was with immense pain that I returned home, only to find it in great turmoil. The invaders had sacked nearby kingdoms and Chitore was in great danger of enemy attack. There was panic everywhere. I prayed to my Kṛṣṇa fervently. As usual, he smiled. When things appeared to settle down for a while and people appeared to be in peace once again, I left Chitore for good. I tried to meet the great saint Tulsīdās but couldn't. I wrote to him but the letter didn't reach him for a long time.

Day after day, my life became more and more Kṛṣṇa-oriented. My breath became Kṛṣṇa. Every cell of my body became Kṛṣṇa. Everything that I saw became Kṛṣṇa. What would separate me from him now? To think of anything other than him became impossible for me. I don't know when the separation ended; I don't know when the little merged into the whole and when the fullness was attained.

ॐ ॐ ॐ ॐ ॐ

Mīrābāī is said to have finally mingled with her Kṛṣṇa when she was about 60 years old. Her life is one of the most inspiring and pleasing stories in the spiritual history of humanity. □

Book Reviews

A SOLEMN PLEDGE FROM THE TRUE TALES OF SHIRDI SAI BABA: By Prof B.H. Briz-Kishore. Published by Sterling Publishers, New Delhi 110016. 2000. Pp. 128. Rs.95.

Thirty-six beautiful stories about Shirdi Sai Baba have been compiled in this book. These are all experiences of devotees of the Baba which go to demonstrate his spiritual powers that remove distress and fulfil worldly aspirations. The tales describe the miraculous powers of the Baba which are beyond all explanation. The book is written with the object of showing solutions to problems as well as ways to the fulfilment of various desires. If one surrenders absolutely to the Baba, it is said, there is unbounded peace and happiness. *A Solemn Pledge* has been designed using the biography of Shirdi Sai Baba, written by Hemadpanth (G.R. Dabholkar). The biography describes numerous incidents of the life of the Baba. Sai Baba left this mortal world in 1919. He respected all religions equally. He believed in the oneness of God. The Baba was considered a wish-fulfilling tree and *kamadhenu* as he, it is said, had the capacity to fulfil the prayers of his devotees.

The book contains some other topics also, like brief sketches of some important characters, Arati prayer-songs, Sai Baba *astottara* Archana, a note on transliteration, etc. Though *A Solemn Pledge* is chiefly meant for the devotees of the Baba, it will appeal to all devotees. As usual, Sterling has brought this out elegantly.

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LIVING IN GOD: By Roy Eugene Davis. Published by Motilal Banarsidass, 41-4A Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, New Delhi 110007. 1998. Pp. 159. Rs.95.

This work is the enumeration of 366 themes for 365 days (plus one for the leap year) for daily meditation. It specifies points of spiritual enrichment needed throughout the year by providing life-enhancing affirmations and inspirational quotations. After each month's schedule, affirmations are given and points are made to use them effec-

tively. They include hints for spiritual deepening. The book provides blank space for recording the experiences of the practitioner. One such affirmation is, 'Living in God I am fulfilled.' This affirmation is enumerated as, 'Express your gratitude for the good fortune you now have....' All the pages of the book are bottom-scribed with quotable quotations from the Bible, the Upanishads, the *Bhagavadgita*, the *Dhammapada*, etc, words of saints like Nanak, Kabir, etc, and famous authors like Tennyson, Tagore, etc. The author of the book is the Director of the Center for Spiritual Awareness, North-East Georgia Mountains, USA. He was ordained by Paramahansa Yogananda in 1951. The book may be used as a textbook by any sadhaka. In a simple and effective manner it tells us how to use affirmations effectively and plan for fulfilling the purpose.

Dr S.P. Dubey
Professor of Philosophy
Rani Durgavati University, Jabalpur

STUDIES IN VIVEKANANDA: By Prof B.N. Sikdar. Published by Kshetra Sikdar, 28 Sujan Bagan, Chinsura, Hooghly 712101. 1999. Pp. 154. Rs.35.

Prof Sikdar is a well-known writer on Swami Vivekananda. His scholarly articles have been published from time to time in *Prabuddha Bharata*. *Studies in Vivekananda* is a beautiful collection of nine such articles. The study of Swamiji's personality, his poems, his eloquence, his humour, and his lectures forms the theme of the book. Prof Sikdar has dived deep into Swamiji's works, and has eruditely shown how Swamiji is unparalleled in many fields. Some of the author's observations display his depth of learning and love for the great monk, who did so much for the world. Prof Sikdar's command over English poetry, oration, etc is revealed in almost every page of the book. This book also reveals how little of Swamiji has been studied, and how many facets lie undetected still.

Such books should be printed well, on excellent paper. We hope the publisher will take care of this crucial aspect in the future. Though the author confesses that there might be repetitions in the book, such repetitions do not come in the way of reading about Swamiji at all.

Editor
Prabuddha Bharata

News and Reports

New Mission Centre

A branch of the Ramakrishna Mission, under the name *Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Belgaum*, has been started at the forest bungalow in Belgaum where Swami Vivekananda had stayed for nine days in October 1892 as a guest of Sri Haripada Mitra who was then the forest officer. It has now been gifted by the Government of Karnataka to the Ramakrishna Mission.

The address of the centre is: Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, 7 Mansing Thapa Road, Behind Post Office, Fort, Belgaum, Karnataka 590016 (Phone: 0831-432789).

Varanasi Home of Service Turns 100

The story of the Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service, Varanasi, is illustrative of how under Heaven's guidance, men, and not money, make things happen. Its present structure may be imposing, but each brick in its building represents so much sacrifice on the part of the pioneers who felt, dreamt, struggled and died. From their ashes sprang fresh dreams and ideals to capture other hearts similarly tuned, till five generations of poor, helpless workers have brought about an achievement in which any organization can take pride.

Inspired by Swami Vivekananda's teachings, several young men of Varanasi, under the leadership of Charuchandra Das (afterwards Swami Shubhananda), Kedarnath Maulik (later Swami Achalananda), and Jaminiranjan Majumdar, had formed themselves into a band towards the middle of June 1900. Their objective was to serve suffering pilgrims, who gather in thousands at that sacred city. They rented a small house and endeavoured with their limited means to provide proper food, shelter, and medical aid to destitute pilgrims, helpless widows, and aged persons lying ill on the streets and ghats of the city. They had named their institution 'Poor Men's Relief Association'. They worked with zeal and a spirit of self-sacrifice. Swamiji was delighted with the work they were doing and was proud of them. 'You have the true spirit, my boys,' he said, 'and you have always my love and blessings! Go on bravely; never mind your poverty; money will come; a great thing will grow of it surpassing your fondest hopes!' So as to fit in with the new outlook inculcated by Swami Vivekananda, the Association was renamed 'The Ramakrishna Home of Service' at his wish. Swamiji himself wrote an appeal to accompany their first report.

Swamiji had told Swami Brahmananda to 'keep an eye on this institution.' It had sincere and dedicated workers no doubt, and had gained popularity; but it required the guidance of some central body and a permanent home for its expanding activities. (The Association had already changed places a few times. It was first located in a rented house in the Rampur quarter of Varanasi. Then it shifted to the Dashashwamedh Ghat area. In June 1901 it returned to the Rampur area, where it was when Swami Vivekananda visited Varanasi.) The management too felt the need and suggested to Swami Brahmananda that the Association be amalgamated with the Ramakrishna Mission. A public meeting, called to confirm this decision of the managing committee, acclaimed it with joy, and soon the institution became an integral part of the Mission and was rechristened 'Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service'. As if to prove that unexpected things happen when a genuine cause stirs people's imagination, the owner of the property on which the Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama, Varanasi, was located, proposed to Swami Shivananda to sell the property for an unusually small amount. On the Swami's advice Charuchandra bought it in July 1906. Swami Brahmananda laid the foundation-stone for the Home on 6 April 1908. On 16 May 1910, the Home moved out of its rented house at Rampur to its permanent abode. By this time the Home of Service had an outdoor dispensary and an indoor section for 50 patients, with office, library, kitchen, etc.

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi visited the centre on 9 November 1912. Pleased at what she saw, she remarked, 'The Master himself is present here, and the Goddess of Wealth resides in her full bounty ... that is why all this work is going on; it is all his work.'

The centre has now grown into a big general hospital having 230 beds; an out-patient dispensary which offers allopathic and homeopathic treatment; two separate old age homes for men and women; and a mobile medical unit.

A special worship at the Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama, Varanasi, on 15 September 2000 marked the opening of the centenary celebrations of the Home of Service. The centre has also announced more functions to be held between 10 and 14 November, which will include several cultural programmes and public meetings.



PRABUDDHA BHARATA

(JANUARY-DECEMBER 2000)

Managing Editor
Editor

Swami Mumukshananda
Swami Sunirmalananda

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